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## RESEARCHING DIGITAL MEDIA AND SOCIETY – AN INTRODUCTION

### Key Questions

- What does it mean that we live in a *deeply mediatised* society? How does this relate to digital media?
- What are some important shifts in the history of researching digital media and society? How has the field of 'internet research' developed over the years?
- How does the particular *data environment* of our digital societies impact on possibilities and challenges for research?
- What does it mean to work with mixed methods, within an *interpretive framework*?

### Key Concepts

Deep mediatisation \* internet research \* reflexivity \* data environment \* mixed methods within an interpretive framework

Hi, hello, welcome! This is where it all begins. This is the book that we wish we would have had back in the days when we were students. It is the book we would have needed when we first started to explore the research field of digital media and society. It is also the book we wish we could have used when starting out teaching students on the courses that we now teach ourselves. We have been

longing for this book, and now here it is! Hopefully, this book will make others happy too.

If you are a student just starting to learn research methods to study digital media and society, welcome! This book is a stepping stone to a wide range of options, ideas, concepts and methodological and ethical practices that are needed when delving into this field. The book not only provides a method-by-method run-through of what digital media research can consist of (Chapters 6–10), but it also covers the entire research process (Chapter 3), from beginning to end, including all the tricky issues involved in mixing methods (Chapter 2), and in approaching one's research and research subjects ethically (Chapter 4). In research in general, and maybe in digital media research in particular, there will always be sidesteps, redevelopments, and 'back to the drawing board' moments. The practical doing of research can be messy! We know. That's why we are doing this together. Simply come along for the ride.

In reality, every research project is different. This is mostly a good thing, as tailoring your approach to the specific task at hand will ensure that you get the best results possible. Even when you have been doing research for quite some time and are starting to get the hang of it, projects are never the same. Your starting points, your previous knowledge, your theoretical and methodological understanding, your ethical positioning, including your own self-reflective practice – all of these may vary. That is why this book can not only be helpful to beginners, but also to those that are already somewhat experienced in researching digital media and society.

We urge you to see this book both as an entry point into the field of digital media research, and as a handbook that you can use in a myriad of ways. Start with this chapter, move on to the next and then the next, until you've read them all. Or skip around, and mix and make connections between the chapters that you need the most right now. It's up to you (oh, but if this book is on your syllabus, listen to your teachers; they get to decide – OK?).

Most of all, this is a book that tries to make digital research methods less daunting, and more accessible and fun. Let it become a companion that you can relate to, return to, and allow it to ask those hard questions that can push your research forward. We want you to experiment with following the different methodological steps that are introduced throughout the following chapters, but also to make them your own. We want you to take ownership of what you are creating. Use this book as a map, while remembering that the map is not the territory. *You* decide which roads you will ultimately end up following or creating. Exciting, no?

## RESEARCHING A DEEPLY MEDIATISED SOCIETY

First of all, why should we even study the relationship between digital media and society? To most people, it will be quite obvious that digital technologies



(smartphones, computers, social media platforms) are no longer nerdy specialities. They are everywhere, and play some kind of role – sometimes a larger one, sometimes a smaller one – in a wide range of social settings. In fact, society has become entangled with the digital. So much so that most researchers no longer cling to the idea that what is digital and what is non-digital can be separated. The digital is everywhere, running through the various contexts of our society, our political beliefs and our personal networks.

As digital media researchers, we have still had to argue, many times, for the point of even focusing on digital technology when researching social issues, hearing from some non-digital scholars that it doesn't matter what people are saying online, that social media research isn't real-world analysis, and so on. By now, hopefully most people have seen enough evidence that what happens 'online' indeed has 'real-life' connections and consequences, not only personal, but also societal, cultural and political. Our social realities have become largely digital, while digital technologies have, to no small degree, become our social reality. Consider, for example, the new role of Russian social media influencers as propaganda machines on TikTok during the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Or consider the spread of conspiracy theories concerning 5G and vaccine mistrust during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Claiming today that the digital sphere is something separate from the rest of society is simply missing out on the big picture. Media scholars Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp have called our contemporary society 'deeply mediated', meaning that our daily lives and the ways we make sense of the world are deeply entangled with the digital infrastructures we rely on for communicating. The title of their book, *The Mediated Construction of Reality*, draws upon the classic work *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* from sociologists Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), one of the most influential texts in the development of social constructionism. This book laid the groundwork for understanding how social concepts and roles are created and upheld within our social systems, at several levels.

Couldry and Hepp (2017) revisit these questions in light of the digital technologies present in contemporary society, to discuss how social theory and research can help us understand how the everyday world we now live in gets constructed both in, and through, digital media. In a deeply mediated society, we need to take into consideration both more digital and less digital iterations of the social concepts we are exploring. The protests in the streets during a Black Lives Matter rally need to be seen alongside the digital traces of #blacklivesmatter social media content, discussions, or online backlashes from different political positions. We should, in other words, take the digitalness of such protests into account, just as we consider their other aspects. The main point is not where the digital begins or ends, but that it is present.

## A HISTORY OF RESEARCH ON DIGITAL MEDIA AND SOCIETY

Digital media, and particularly the internet,<sup>1</sup> are technologically entangled, sometimes strange, and definitely ever-changing. And so are the methods used to research it. Studies may focus on people, technologies or devices, the platforms or apps, or the social spaces and uses of digital media. When it comes to what the actual study object may be, all of these different possibilities have also meant that research on digital media and society can look at its subject matter in a multitude of ways, for example seeing digital media as a social sphere where people interact, as a tool that people use, or as a field in which to collect data. Such complexities call for us to consider the ways that the digital technologies themselves have changed, in relation to how research around them has been conducted. Figures 1.1–1.4, partly drawing on Hooley, Marriott and Wellens (2012: 8–10), give a general, and non-exhaustive, overview of how digital media – focusing on the internet as the crucial technology – has developed, and how research interests and methods have followed along. It is important to note that the items in both columns of these figures are non-exhaustive, and aim to merely paint a broad picture.

As shown in Figure 1.1, the first version of the internet was launched in the late 1960s, followed by early iterations of email and mobile phone technologies in the early 1970s. Initially, the academic research around these things naturally had

1960s - 1980s	DIGITAL MEDIA	RESEARCH
	<b>Early forms of computer-mediated communication</b> Birth of the internet (late 60s) First email (1971) First mobile phone (1973)	Technologically oriented research Computer science
	<b>Early discussion forums</b> BBSs (1978) Usenet (1980)	Early studies of 'information society' (Bell, Toffler). De Sola Pool: "Technologies of Freedom" (1983)
		First online survey (1986)
		First computer packages for qualitative data analysis

**Figure 1.1** Digital media and research, 1960s–1980s

<sup>1</sup> Nowadays, researchers tend not to capitalise the letter i in internet, but for a long time it was customary to do so (written as 'Internet').

a strong focus on technological issues around their development and optimisation. This kind of research still exists, of course, and has become more and more developed when it comes to understanding the interplay between humans and technology (see, for example, Sharp et al., 2019). As more social and community-oriented uses of the internet emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, with early modes of computer-mediated communication similar to today's online discussion forums, more socially oriented research perspectives were also developed. Some key social science texts about the emerging 'information society' were published (Bell, 1973; Toffler, 1980), and Ithiel de Sola Pool (1983) wrote about the new electronic media as being potential 'technologies of freedom' that could enhance free speech. It was also during the 1980s that the first online survey was carried out (Kiesler & Sproull, 1986), and that some of the first software programs for qualitative data analysis were introduced (Wolski, 2018).

The 1990s was indeed a formative decade for the study of digital media and society, as research on social practices online took off. This increased interest and scholarly activity was due to the broad introduction and breakthrough of the World Wide Web (Berners-Lee, 1989). Seminal books such as *The Virtual Community* by Howard Rheingold (1993), *Life on the Screen* by Sherry Turkle (1995) and *The Rise of the Network Society* by Manuel Castells (1996), provided stepping stones for studies to follow, by approaching digital media as social spheres. During the 1990s, the field of internet research started to take shape around emerging research centres, conferences and academic journals. Early on, discussions were

1990s	DIGITAL MEDIA	RESEARCH
	<b>World Wide Web (WWW)</b>	Pew Internet Research Center (1990)
	Public release of the Web (1990)	Rheingold: "virtual community" (1993)
	First web browsers and search engines	Methodological discussions about online interviewing (1994)
	Google search launched (1997)	<i>Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication</i> is launched (1995)
	<b>Early stages of social media</b>	Early mentions of 'internet ethnography'
	First weblog ('blog') (1997)	Turkle: "Life on the Screen" (1995)
	First social network site (1997)	First debate over online research ethics (1996)
		Castells: "network society" (1996)
		The WWW and Contemporary Cultural Theory conference at Drake University (1997)
		The Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University (1998)
		The journal <i>New Media and Society</i> launches (1999)

**Figure 1.2** Digital media and research, 1960s–1990s

revolving around methodological issues such as online interviewing (Brotherson, 1994), emerging forms of internet ethnography (Correll, 1995) and – notably – ethics (Allen, 1996; Boehlefeld, 1996; King, 1996; Thomas, 1996). This decade also saw the emergence of online formats and platforms that signalled the beginning of the era of social media, such as the first blog, *Robot Wisdom*, in 1997 (Djuraskovic, 2015), and the first social network site, SixDegrees.com, in that same year (boyd & Ellison, 2007).

The development of digital media, and digital media research, continued throughout the 00s (Figure 1.3). One important historical step for internet studies was the inaugural conference of the Association of Internet Researchers, held in Kansas in 2000. Initiatives, and research centres, such as the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society and the Oxford Internet Institute, helped to further cement the importance of the emerging field. Increasingly, a number of studies focused on people's everyday uses of the internet. For example, Wellman and Haythornthwaite's edited book *The Internet in Everyday Life* (2002) focused specifically on the social effects of the internet, and how it fits into everyday lives rather than seeing it as an alternate world. Studies like these considered different ways of being social in internet contexts, such as using email, instant messaging and blogging. While the field was still under development, Nancy Baym (2005) stressed that even though internet studies had generally been considered a scattered, interdisciplinary field, it should now be considered as its own discipline.

In 2004, sociologist Barry Wellman announced that, what he called the 'third age' of internet studies, had arrived. While early internet research had focused first on groups, and then on user studies, Wellman argued that an age of individualised

(20)00s	DIGITAL MEDIA	RESEARCH
	<b>Mobile</b>	
	Launch of 3G telecomms (2001)	Inauguration of the Association of Internet Researchers (2000)
	Development of VOIP (2004)	Batinic et al.: "Online social sciences" (2002)
	iPhone launched (2007)	Hine: "virtual methods" (2005)
	Launch of 4G network (2009)	Jenkins: "convergence culture" (2006)
	<b>Web 2.0 / Social media</b>	boyd: "networked publics" (2008)
	Wikipedia (2001)	Markham & Baym: "internet inquiry" (2009)
	Myspace (2003)	
	Facebook (2004)	
	YouTube (2005)	
	Reddit (2005)	
	Twitter (2006)	
	Tumblr (2007)	

**Figure 1.3** Digital media and research, (20)00s

networks was dawning, as there was a move from a focus on community to a focus on social networks:

[T]he evolving personalization, portability, ubiquitous connectivity, and wireless mobility of the internet is facilitating a move away from interactions in groups and households, and towards individualized networks. The internet is helping each person to become a communication and information switchboard, between persons, networks, and institutions. (Wellman, 2004: 127)

Likewise, danah boyd (2014) has narrowed down this very important change of the internet to the year 2003, when the big shift from it being specified around different topics towards it being focused on individual social networks, occurred.

As increasingly social and participatory platforms emerged on the web during the 00s, there was talk of a shift in terms of a move from Web 1.0 – a more static and mass communication-oriented web – to Web 2.0, based on participation, editability and user-created content (Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008). In what is often referred to as the original definition of Web 2.0, Tim O'Reilly (2005) lists a set of important differences between 1.0 and 2.0, such as a shift from personal websites to blogs and feeds, a shift from seeing web content as a one-time investment to seeing it as an ongoing process, and a shift from content management systems to linking based on used-driven tagging (so-called folksonomy; Vander Wal, 2007).

The field of researching digital media and society continued to develop throughout the 00s, as the inaugural conference of the Association of Internet Researchers was held in 2000, and books such as *Online Social Sciences* (Batinic et al.,

2010s	DIGITAL MEDIA	RESEARCH
	<b>Tools and platforms</b>	Papacharissi: "the networked self" (2010)
	iPad introduced (2010)	Morozov: "the net delusion" (2011)
	Fitbit step counter (2010)	Bennett & Segerberg: "connective action" (2012)
	Siri and Alexa (2011/2014)	Rogers: "digital methods" (2013)
	Samsung and Apple smart watches (2013/2015)	van Dijck and Poell: "social media logic" (2013)
	Google Glass (2013)	First issue of <i>Social Media + Society</i> (2015)
	First NFT (2014)	Lupton: "the quantified self" (2016)
	Launch of 5G network (2019)	Chadwick: "the hybrid media system" (2017)
	<b>Social media</b>	Couldry and Hepp: "deep mediatization" (2017)
	Instagram (2010)	Noble: "algorithms of oppression" (2018)
	Snapchat (2011)	
	Musical.ly and TikTok (2017)	

Figure 1.4 Digital media and research, 2010s



2002), *Virtual Methods: Issues in social research on the internet* (Hine, 2005), *Netnography* (Kozinets, 2015, 2020), and *Internet Inquiry: Conversations about method* (Markham & Baym, 2009) being published. Quite in line with the Web 2.0 era, key research at this time was focused on participation (Jenkins, 2006), peer-production (Benkler, 2006) and networked publics (boyd, 2008).

The digital media landscape evolved further throughout the 2010s, with developments in mobiles, tablets, and wearable technologies, as well as deeply digital forms and phenomena such as the Internet of Things (Thomas, 2006), blockchain, bitcoin and NFTs (Idelberger & Mezei, 2022). At the same time, the ecosystem of social media platforms had continued to develop with new additions such as Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok, adding new complexities in terms of visuality, ephemerality, and algorithmically governed user feeds (Bayer et al., 2016; Leaver et al., 2020; Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). Throughout the decade, research on digital media and society became more multi-layered and diversified with studies and conceptual developments around issues of identity (Papacharissi, 2011), politics (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) and datafication (Lupton, 2016). In light of the occurrence of hate-speech, racism and anti-feminism online, a more critical strand of research also grew stronger, counterbalancing the research on participation and democratisation by highlighting also the more oppressive sides of digital media (Morozov, 2011; Noble, 2018). Methodological discussions began, emphasising the importance of not merely adapting existing research methods for the internet, but also developing novel, natively digital methods (Rogers, 2013). Such methods, it was argued, are needed to analyse the increasingly hybrid (Chadwick, 2013), and deeply mediatised (Couldry & Hepp, 2017), digital society and its emerging media logics (van Dijck & Poell, 2013).

Today, this development towards (1) an increased complexity in terms of how *the digital* and *society* overlap (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Kitchin, 2021; Nielsen & Ganter, 2022); (2) an exacerbated dualism between democratic gains and threats to democracy (Bail, 2021; Bennett & Livingston, 2021); and (3) the need to develop increasingly hybrid and novel research methods (Lindgren, 2020), pushes the field of researching digital media and society further. In this context, it is not the task of this book to take on the most intense challenges that may have to be faced in the years to come. Rather, we want to provide a steady platform for newcomers to the field. On the one hand, we will introduce a set of concrete methods (Chapters 5–10) that will be useful, each in their own right, when formulating research tasks and taking them on (Chapter 3). On the other hand, we also encourage you to think eclectically and dynamically about methods (Chapter 2), and to carefully consider the ethical issues involved in this (Chapter 4). Before we move on to the next chapter, and its discussions about mixing methods, we will deal in more detail with the research context that we are facing, starting with considering the role of datafication for digital media research.

## A NEW DATA ENVIRONMENT

Throughout the past ten years or so, there has been much talk about ‘big data’, meaning the vast amount of data available through the increased information available online. Big data has been defined, by boyd and Crawford (2012: 663), as ‘the cultural, technological, and scholarly phenomenon’ that rests upon the interplay of technology (‘maximizing computation power and algorithmic accuracy to gather, analyse, link, and compare large data sets’), analysis (‘drawing on large data sets to identify patterns in order to make economic, social, technical, and legal claims’) and mythology (‘the widespread belief that large data sets offer a higher form of intelligence and knowledge that can generate insights that were previously impossible, with the aura of truth, objectivity, and accuracy’). In reality, however, the emergence of big data is only one of many transformations in our data environment, which affects opportunities as well as challenges when doing digital social research. For example, Kingsley Purdam and Mark Elliot aptly point out that what is commonly known as ‘big’ data is in fact data defined by several other things, rather than just its large size: it registers things as they happen in real time, it offers new possibilities to combine and compare datasets, and so on. Furthermore, Purdam and Elliot believe that even these characterisations are not sufficient. This is because those definitions still seem to assume that data is ‘something we have’, when in fact ‘the reality and scale of the data transformation is that data is now something we are becoming immersed and embedded in’ (Purdam & Elliot, 2015: 26).

The notion of a ‘data environment’ underlines that people today are, at the same time, generators of, and generated by, this new environment. ‘Instead of people being researched’, Purdam and Elliot (2015: 26) say, ‘they are the research’. Their point, more concretely, is that new data types have emerged – and are constantly emerging – that demand new, flexible approaches. Researching digital media and society, therefore, often entails discovering and experimenting with the challenges and possibilities of ever-new types and combinations of information.

### Different Types of Data

In trying to describe the ever-changing data environment, Purdam and Elliot (2015: 28–29) outline an eight-point typology of different data types based on how the data in question has been generated:

- 1 **Orthodox intentional data:** Data collected and used with the respondent’s explicit agreement. All so-called orthodox social science data (e.g. survey, focus group or inter-view data and also data collected via observation) would come into this category. New orthodox methods continue to be developed.



- 2 **Participative intentional data:** In this category data are collected through some inter- active process. This includes some new data forms such as crowdsourced data [...].
- 3 **Consequential data:** Information that is collected as a necessary transaction that is secondary to some (other) interaction (e.g. administrative records, electronic health records, commercial transaction data and data from online game playing all come into this category).
- 4 **Self-published data:** Data deliberately self-recorded and published that can potentially be used for social science research either with or without explicit permission, given the information has been made public (e.g. long-form blogs, CVs and profiles).
- 5 **Social media data:** Data generated through some public, social process that can potentially be used for social science research either with or without permission (e.g. micro-blogging platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook, and, perhaps, online game data).
- 6 **Data traces:** Data that is 'left' (possibly unknowingly) through digital encounters, such as online search histories and purchasing, which can be used for social science research either by default use agreements or with explicit permission.
- 7 **Found data:** Data that is available in the public domain, such as observations of public spaces, which can include covert research methods.
- 8 **Synthetic data:** Where data has been simulated, imputed or synthesized. This can be derived from, or combined with, other data types.

The most important point here is that while social research traditionally relies on orthodox intentional data (1), such as surveys and interviews, digital media have enabled much more far-reaching registration and collection of participative intentional data (2), consequential data (3), self-published data (4), and found data (7). These are types of data that indeed existed before digitally networked tools and platforms but which have been expanded and accentuated. The remaining types – social media data (5), data traces (6), and, at least chiefly, synthetic data (8) – are specific to digital society. Therefore, researchers who analyse this society face dramatically altered conditions for the generation and gathering of data about social processes and interactions.

In today's world, large amounts of social data are registered and aggregated independently of initiatives from researchers. This is illustrated by work such as that of computational sociologists Scott Golder and Michael Macy (2011). Their research mapped people's affective states throughout the day as expressed via X (formerly Twitter),<sup>2</sup> in 84 countries, generating results of high interest to its subject

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<sup>2</sup> Twitter, launched in 2006, was an often-studied social media platform among researchers up until its acquisition by Elon Musk in 2022. The change in ownership

area, but using a research design that was, by necessity, dictated by the availability and character of the time-stamped and text-based social media data. Examples of similar, highly data-driven, studies exist in several other fields. Researchers of digital media and society are often left to deal with data generated through platforms, rather than having the opportunity to elicit data in more conventional ways that are controlled by the researcher to a higher degree. While choosing an approach – for instance, opting for a survey or for in-depth interviews – will have continued relevance in some contexts, scholars are now increasingly facing the challenge of thinking up and constructing some of their ‘methods’ after the fact.

One of Purdam and Elliot’s (2015) main points in the presentation of their typology is the argument that the complexity of today’s data environment forces researchers to constantly think about the highly variable characteristics of data that they encounter or seek out. And one of the key challenges when entering this type of terrain is the need to constantly try out new methods for data gathering. In order to know that the data we elicit or download, as well as the strategies we choose to make sense of it, are appropriate, we may test our strategy to see whether it produces good research results. However, the dilemma is that in order to know that the results are good, we must already have developed the appropriate method. Because of this constant – and potentially endless – need for experimentation and discovery, investigations drawing on new tools and approaches risk becoming stuck and intellectually unproductive very quickly.

Imagine, for instance, that you are researching some aspect of social interaction on a platform like YouTube, and have decided that an analysis of user comments on videos seems to be the data-collection method of choice. Now, if this had been survey responses, or interview transcriptions, you could rely on an entire canon of literature on methods and well-established research practices in order to understand how to work with such data. Even though you might want to undertake new approaches or challenge the conventional ways of going about the research, you would at least have a sort of baseline or common practice to relate to and argue with. But, in the case of YouTube comments, you would have to do a lot more groundwork. First, for example, you would have to find a way of collecting the comments. If the number of comments was large enough for it to be inconvenient to manually copy and paste them – which is often the case – you would have to find some tool or another to automatically capture and download them. This risks the use of trial and error as you work your way through a variety of browser plugins, scripts or applications, none of which may eventually do what you want them to do. This process can be very time-consuming and it is not uncommon for the researcher to become so engaged with this very quest for a

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came with new, much more restrictive, regulations around how scholars can download research data from the platform. In 2023, Twitter was rebranded as X.

tool that they – instead of doing the social research that was initially intended – start to devote a lot of time to searching for ever ‘better’ tools or learning how to code their own tools. And this is only the first step of several subsequent ones, where other challenges may throw you off track.

Once the comments are collected and ordered, there are wide ranges of issues as regards to how knowledge of the comments should be achieved as well as ethical issues to address. What are the comments actually? Are they individual comments or conversations? How should you, if at all, take the likes and dislikes of the comments into consideration? Do all of the comments relate to the YouTube video in question, or can the comment threads take on lives of their own, to become forums for the discussion of issues other than those instigated by the video? How can you, ethically, use these data for research? Do you need the informed consent of all the people who have posted in the thread? And so on. In sum, because of the inherent multidimensional complexity and unresolved questions, research on digital society must embrace research methods as a creative act. Instead of relying on previous work, copying and pasting run-of-the-mill methods sections into our papers, researchers must ‘reveal the messy details of what they are actually doing, aiming toward mutual reflection, creativity, and learning that advances the state of the art’ (Sandvig & Hargittai, 2015: 5).

## CHALLENGES IN RESEARCHING DIGITAL MEDIA AND SOCIETY

In other words, the complexity of today’s data environment, alongside other particularities and issues that arise when researching digital media and society, offers a set of challenges, which underlines the need for the kind of thinking around research methods that we want to engage with through this book. For example, the above-mentioned demand for reflexivity on behalf of researchers of digital media and society operates on several different levels. Markham and Baym argue that research design is an ongoing process, and that especially in studying digital media within dynamic and exploratory projects, the latter will need to be reframed continuously throughout the process of research. They write:

Different questions occur at different stages of a research process, and the same questions reappear at different points. Second, the constitution of data is the result of a series of decisions at critical junctures in the design and conduct of a study. [...] We must constantly and thoroughly evaluate what will count as data and how we are distinguishing side issues from key sources of information. (Markham & Baym, 2009: xvii)

As Jones (1999) emphasises, when researching the specificities of the internet, it is important to remember that its uses are always contextualised. Research subjects, both human and non-human actors in the sense of actor-network theory, as mentioned elsewhere in this book, are part of physical space as much as they are part of 'cyberspace'. This means, Jones (1999: xii) says, that '[n]ot only is it important to be aware of and attuned to the diversity of online experience, it is important to recognize that online experience is at all times tethered in some fashion to offline experience'.

So, while it is exciting to study the internet and digital society, it is also especially challenging. New platforms, concepts and social practices emerge fast enough to make the 'internet' itself a compelling area of inquiry. The field, Markham and Baym (2009: xviii–xix) write, has a 'self-replenishing novelty [that] always holds out the promise for unique intellectual spaces'. But, as discussed above, new terrains of research bring with them new challenges and difficulties. First, there is a need for constant reflection on the role of the self in research. Processes of digital social research highlight that researchers are actually co-creators of the field of study. Our choices are made in contexts where there are no standard rules for research design and practice, and this makes such choices more meaningful. Furthermore, the often- disembodied character of digital social settings makes it important to think a little deeper about the relationship between the researcher and the researched:

What decisions are we making to seek consent; what counts as an authentic self-representation? How are we conceptualizing the embodied persons we study? How are we framing our own embodied sensibilities? Do we approach what we are studying as traces left in public spaces or as embodied activities by people situated in rich offline contexts? We must consider how to interpret other people's selves and how to represent ourselves to the people we study, especially when we may not be meeting them in person. (Markham & Baym, 2009: xviii–xix)

Researchers and their subjects, Purdam and Elliot (2015: 47) say, increasingly bleed into one another. This is because 'as the proportion of our lives spent online grows, so the boundary between data and subject becomes less distinct'. In the same sense that offline identities of people are partially coming together in the minds and memories of others, our online selves are partially constructed in our intentional or unintentional data footprints.

Second, Purdam and Elliot argue, 'the activities of others also contribute to constructing these footprints, for example, a photograph of a person might be in the public domain as a result of being posted online by someone else'. Additionally, that photograph might also have been shared, tagged, liked or remixed by somebody else, and it may contain 'meta-identity information' (2015: 47). So, if a

‘researcher’ analyses this photo, posted by a ‘research subject’, then who or what is actually being analysed? Things are further complicated in the movement from orthodox, intentional datasets to various types of data streams or synthetisations, which blurs the distinction between data and analysis.

Third, and finally, it is important to think about the quality of the data used in research. Conventional social science has a set of established mechanisms for quality control, which assess things such as the reliability, validity and generalisability of research results. The introduction of new types of data, and new modes of data gathering, demand that we ask ourselves questions about the most rigorous and robust methods of going about our research in order to avoid unnecessary errors or biases. When analysing different platforms, such as a discussion forum or X (formerly Twitter), and making claims about society, we must remain critical in understanding whose views – whose society – are being expressed on the platform in question, and in our own particular sample. Generally, however, conventional and established ways of thinking about such things can’t be easily transferred to studies based on many of the new data types. The criterion of validity, for example, is about evaluating to what degree one is actually studying what one purports to study. Giving an example based on X (formerly Twitter), Purdam and Elliot (2015: 48) posit:

For example, a tweet might be generated for fun, to provide information or to persuade or mislead; the motivation obviously affects the meaning of the tweet. With survey data and even, to some extent, administrative data, the impact of respondent motivations is, at least in principle, structured by (or perhaps mediated by) the data collection instrument itself. Thus, a well-designed social science research instrument can constrain motivational impact. But this is not so with Twitter data; here people’s motivations are given full rein – a tweet might be designed to manipulate or obfuscate, to attract truth or to repel it. It might be designed to fantasize or ‘try out an opinion’, to provoke a response or simply to create controversy.

So, here we can choose different pathways: Do we want to find verification techniques with which to check the ‘quality’ of these data – for example, looking at a user’s tweets over time to see whether a tweet is characteristic or not – or is it more feasible to argue that we are not studying the person, but something else? Society? Culture? The medium? These are the kinds of challenges and choices that we want to guide you through with this book.

## AN INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORK

We will argue throughout this book for a position that might be called *methodological pragmatism* (see Chapter 2). By this, we mean that the methods that one

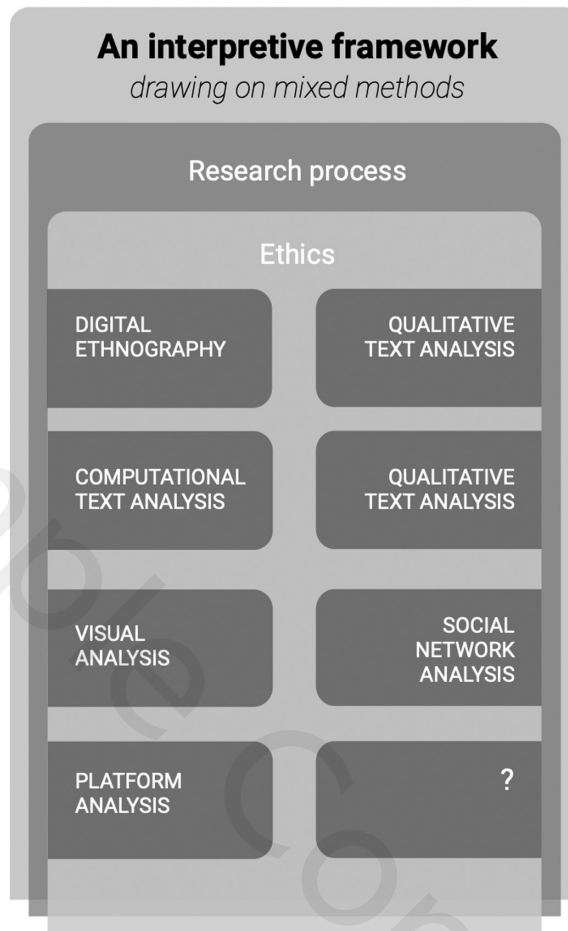


uses when researching digital media and society should be chosen and carried out in a pragmatic – practically oriented – way. After reading this book, you will be oriented in a set of different methodological approaches that can be drawn upon in a variety of different combinations, and with varying emphasis. For some research tasks, an approach that rests entirely on what is described in the chapter about qualitative text analysis might be sufficient. For other tasks, maybe a combination of social network analysis and digital ethnography will be the most suitable. To respond to other sets of research questions, one might be best off focusing on strategies described in the chapter about visual analysis, and so on.

We believe that – in research more generally, but particularly when studying something as dynamic, rapidly changing and socio-technical as digital media and society – methods must be used in creative and adaptive ways to best fit the object of study. More often than not, it is advisable to use mixed-methods approaches (discussed further in Chapter 2). As exemplified above, these may include a range of possible strategies, out of which we will introduce some useful ones throughout Chapters 5–10. While Chapters 5 and 6 introduce the more interpretive techniques of digital ethnography and qualitative text analysis respectively, Chapters 7 and 8 focus on some more computational approaches (to text and network analysis respectively). Chapters 9 and 10 focus on approaches to analysing visual content and the actual interfaces and infrastructures of digital platforms.

Two important points must be made here. First, that there are indeed significant overlaps between several of these approaches. To mention a couple of examples, visual analysis can be an aspect of digital ethnography, and social network analysis can be an important element in computational text analysis. Clearly, for pedagogical reasons, we introduce the approaches in separate chapters, but acknowledge, and actually embrace, the fact that they bleed together. In practice, as will be discussed in Chapter 2, we encourage the use of *methodological pragmatism* – a strategy which entails the researcher mixing and matching to combine a research strategy that best fits the task at hand, without feeling forced to adhere dogmatically to any particular ‘school’ of method. Second, it is important that we see the ethnographical approach from a two-fold perspective. On the one hand, *digital ethnography*, as a somewhat more narrowly described qualitative method for analysing digital media and society, is introduced in Chapter 5. In that sense, we see its set of tools and techniques as one of several methodological ‘packages’ that can be parts of a tailored mixed-methods combination. On the other hand, we propose a view where a broader ethnographic sensibility guides the entire research process, no matter which different methods are the parts of the chosen strategy at hand.

This idea – that an ethnographic mindset should guide the research, regardless of which specific method (‘ethnographic’ or not by actual name) – is key to this book. To distinguish between these two meanings of ethnography – (1) as a



**Figure 1.5** Elements in researching digital media and society

mindset for the entire research enterprise; (2) as the particular method of 'digital ethnography' which is only one of many possible hands-on strategies for research – we will speak, on the one hand, of an *interpretive framework*, as in (1), encompassing all the methods that we introduce, and, on the other hand, of *digital ethnography*, as in (2), in Chapter 5. Figure 1.5 illustrates this.

As the figure shows, if we read it from the inside and out, research on digital media and society can draw on a number of different building blocks, as represented by the different approaches that this book introduces: digital ethnography (Chapter 5), qualitative text analysis (Chapter 6), computational text analysis (Chapter 7), social network analysis (Chapter 8), visual analysis (Chapter 9), and platform analysis (Chapter 10). The question mark in the lower-right corner of Figure 1.5 represents the fact that these methods – while common and useful – are



not the only possible ones to use. They can be used, solely and in combinations (Chapter 2), both amongst each other and with other methods that are beyond the scope of this book.

We see these as hands-on methods, in the sense that they represent empirical and analytical approaches that are chosen by the researcher in their concrete work in exploring, mapping and analysing their object or area of study. As we will emphasise and introduce in this book, researching digital media and society – like doing any other research – demands elaborate thinking around issues of ethics (Chapter 4). As shown in Figure 1.5, we see this ethical sensibility and the surrounding and underpinning hands-on strategies, or combinations thereof, that the researcher draws upon. Furthermore, as illustrated by the second outermost layer in the figure, any ethically guided hands-on methodological work must be set within the supporting structure of a research process (Chapter 3), which organises the empirical and analytical work according to a set of steps by which one advances from research questions to insights and results.

Finally, then, we see the entire research task as set within an interpretive framework – which means that we conceive of researching digital media and society as an enterprise aiming to achieve an understanding which is as rich as possible, drawing in strategic and fruitful ways on any possible tools that are at hand. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz wrote in his book *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) that the ultimate goal of the research is to provide a ‘thick description’ of the patterns, modes and functions of social life. The basic assumption on which this approach rests is that culture is ‘semiotic’ – it is made out of a complex set of symbols in the form of language, traits, customs, gestures, attitudes, actions, and so on, which are webbed together in systems ‘within which they can be intelligibly – that is, thickly – described’ (1973: 14). He wrote further:

Ethnography is thick description. What the ethnographer is in fact faced with – except when (as, of course, he must do) he is pursuing the more automatized routines of data collection – is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render. [...] Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of ‘construct a reading of’) a manuscript – foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behaviour. (1973: 9–10)

One of Geertz’s key influences was the sociology of Max Weber (1922/1978: 4), which was focused on ‘the interpretive understanding of social action’ – on the subjective meanings that people attach to their social actions. Drawing on

Weber's idea of 'Verstehen' (understanding), according to which society should be analysed from a participatory and interpretive point of view, Geertz (1973: 5) famously stated:

Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after, construing social expressions on their surface enigmatical.

So, Geertz argues that ethnography is about analysing the meaning that people ascribe to their self-created 'webs of significance'. Similarly, Malinowski (1922: 9) said that ethnography should lay bare the unknown social and cultural principles that govern what previously seemed 'chaotic and freakish', 'sensational, wild and unaccountable'. As opposed to thin description, which just provides an account of facts, without interpreting them, thick description is characterised by specifying many details, the laying bare of conceptual structures, and the revelation of meanings. According to Geertz, it is the task of the ethnographer to not only present facts, but also to comment on and interpret them. The researcher must try to trace the ways in which meaning is ascribed. Against this background, it should be easy to see that ethnography – in terms of a broad interpretive framework – is highly relevant in researching digital media and society, not least because now, since long, 'the Internet is the fabric of our lives' (Castells, 2002: 1).

As Figure 1.5 shows, we believe that researching the complexities of digital media and society demands an interpretive framework which is focused on issues of meaning-making, and on finding conceptual structures and social relationships. This then, once again, means to bring in strategies under the broader ethnographic umbrella, that are not conventionally associated with the ethnographic method. This is because – as we will also discuss in more detail in Chapter 5 – the notions of what actually constitutes the 'field' or 'the data' of ethnographic analysis are altered in digital society. This is in line with what Robert Kozinets has written about 'netnography'. In his writings about that approach, he argues that devising research methods for studying sociality online is about 'intelligent adaptation' and 'considering all options'. The root, he says, should be in the core principles of conventional ethnography, but researchers of digital media and society must also seek to selectively and systematically seize 'the possibilities of incorporating and blending computational methods of data collection, analysis, word recognition, coding and visualization' (2015: 79). We will argue in Chapter 2 that researching digital media and society should rely on methodological bricolage, and that it must move beyond any divisions between 'qualitative' and 'quantitative'. Kozinets would agree, and writes (2015: 53–54):

## AN INTRODUCTION

Consider that the images, words, Facebook profiles, Twitter hashtags, sounds and video files flowing through the Internet are composed of binary signals and various electromagnetically charged and uncharged blips of electrons and photons riding wires between various distant servers. Ultimately, they are zeroes and ones, already numerical and, in their own way, quantitative. We thus see fluidity and transferability, as analogue human experiences such as sitting and talking to a camera are transferred into digitally coded signals shared through a platform like Vine or YouTube, then decoded into densely pixelled moving images on screens and sounds emanating from speakers and headphones. This experience of audiencing can be captured as qualitative words and images experienced by a human listener and watcher, coded into fieldnotes or captured as a text file or visual screenshot, and immediately or subsequently optionally coded and transferred into a quantitative reading. Quant becomes qual becomes quant in this slippery shifting example.

## CONCLUSION

In this first chapter, we have provided an introduction to this book and our ideas behind it. We have discussed, throughout the chapter, what it means to research digital media in a society that is mediated to the degree that it is not always easy to see where different media begins or ends. It is all complex and embedded. After giving a general outline of the parallel development of digital media technologies on the one hand, and digital media research on the other, we discussed the new data environment and some particular challenges that we face when researching digital media and society. Maybe the most important takeaway of this chapter is that technologies, society and research methods will all continue to change. Being a researcher of digital media and society means that you have to keep up and stay on your toes – open to new developments. We will talk about this flexible approach in chapters to come as well, so note this fact for now, as we will expand on it moving forward. The *methodological pragmatism* that we have begun to sketch out in this chapter, and its repercussions, are part of this. Any research method outlined in this book needs to be implemented in your study with care. The goal for your work should always be to stay creative, flexible and constantly informed. Your approach must always be adapted so that it fits your object of study (Chapter 3). Sometimes this will mean mixing methods (Chapter 2), and you must continuously re-evaluate your study as ethical issues arise (Chapter 4).