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Whiting, Rebecca and Pritchard, Katrina (2015) Big Data? Qualitative Approaches to Digital Research. [Book Review]

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The book's rationale is the ubiquity of digital devices and systems that cause us to renegotiate and re-organize "the content and boundaries of work and leisure, public and private life" (p xi). Not only do we have to engage with this changing landscape of sociotechnical relations in our daily lives, we, particularly researchers, need to engage with "potentially novel ways of knowing about social change" (p xi). Although this book is written by sociologists and is concerned with "digital social research" it has a great deal to recommend it to a wider audience, particularly readers of this journal who are qualitative researchers in the field of organization and management.

We count ourselves amongst this group and we welcome the book's critical engagement with big data and all that this entails for research. Whilst some settings may not feature in organizational research, most contexts (such as the NHS) readily translate into the management sphere. Particular strengths are recognition that big data is both "rhetorically persuasive and materially pervasive" (*Hand*, p.3) and therefore needs to be approached sceptically, examining and integrating new with old in terms of research concepts and methods.

The editors' aim is to situate debates about digitization within the wider field of qualitative research. The overall approach is to ask new, often practical, questions concerning familiar research objects, for example, the relationship between established methodological frameworks and novel digital techniques. While not explicitly stating the book has a particular geographic focus, many chapters locate their research within a UK context.

Each chapter starts with an abstract which may help in navigating and selecting readings from the book. Those new to digital research seeking material on, say, the ethics of digital data engagement will find that this topic is covered (very usefully, for example, in *Hutchinson's* chapter) but not all in one place (it crops up in other chapters too). This reflects the book's approach which embeds such topics within its overarching organizing themes. This requires some heavy lifting on the part of the non-specialist reader. The book is at its best when it engages with these topics through a reflexive account of actual research projects, i.e. when it shows rather than tells. A general index would have been a useful addition particularly as the lack of chapter numbers makes it difficult to navigate. We refer to the chapters by author surnames.

The book opens with an overview by the editors setting out the book's aims and structure. This is followed by a critical review (*Hand*) of current trends and methodological debates in digital social research. This offers a particularly useful unpacking of big data, a theme developed in each of the chapters. *Hand* invokes sociology under threat, for example, through commercialisation of big data by poll companies, and suggests the potential death of what are presented as sociology's traditional

methods, the interview and survey. The limits of digitalisation might however have warranted more attention here at the outset.

The book's remaining eleven chapters are then organized around five organizing themes; each theme examines different conceptualizations of what digital social research, data and methods are and could be.

Part I addresses institutional mobilizations and appropriations of data. Both chapters deal with complex issues, tackling an ambitious scope. In *Goffey, Pettinger & Speed*, the subject is the NHS; readers not familiar with the UK's National Health Service will find some aspects of this a challenge. There is a detailed account of struggles with the automation and digitalisation of medical data in this complex organization. The more interesting observations include unpacking understandings of 'good' data while issues of privacy are also discussed.

*Trottier* then examines the construction of digitalisation and big data as either utopian (empowering users) or dystopian (causing social harm). We found the section on 'digital vigilantism' particularly interesting though felt this could have been further developed to explore the relationships with other forms of (positive and negative) citizen activity. The focus here is on crime and policing, with many different case examples provided to tease out tensions between the utopian and dystopian predictions.

Part II examines fields and sites. *Lohmeier* offers a critique of big data approaches and highlights the limitations of using 'freely available' social media data for research. This might leave newcomers to the field wondering where to go next. She introduces digital ethnography as an alternative approach but is only able to offer a very brief outline of what this might involve. She rightly recognises Christine Hine (2012, 2000) as a pioneer in this area; her books would be a useful resource for those wishing to explore these ideas further.

*Hutchinson* then provides a useful in depth review of studying online forums. This practical worked example offers a useful development to *Lohmeier's* previous overview. In walking through important issues of research design (such as ethics) and sharing examples of analysis, this really brings qualitative digital research to life.

Part III focuses on digital, digitized and participatory methods. *Hardey's* practical chapter offers guidelines for conducting digital social research (e.g. the benefits of combining "digital" methods such as "loitering" on review websites with traditional methods such as interviews) and on ethics, in particular the thorny issues of informed consent and anonymity in digital settings. It also engages with digital tools and their limitations.

*Bancroft, Karels, Murray & Zimpfer* examine working with participant-produced data in an era of crowdsourcing and citizen science research. Their focus is a video study, situating it within the history of diary research methods, but utilising their participants' familiarity with social media conventions. It includes a useful examination of the informal power dynamics at play, problematizing the notion of researcher and researched which the authors suggest may be a false binary.

*Tummons'* chapter reviews the literature on using software for qualitative data analysis, covering concerns and supposed advantages for the research process. The rest is a reflexive account of using

Atlas-Ti in a large multi-institution project involving many different data forms (YouTube videos, observations, photos, and written texts). Indeed the chapter would have benefitted from more on this and less on the literature.

Part IV explores visibilities, routines and practices. *Smith's* chapter goes to the heart of the book, exploring "analytic troubles that come with integrating qualitative methodologies with 'big data' analyses" (p 181). Readers may welcome the observation that social scientists can bring much needed sophistication and complexity to such analyses and an effective critical voice to big data ideology, in particular the notion that its sheer size means that the numbers "speak for themselves". It contends that the greatest contribution that qualitative research can make is through examining practices in real life settings, the sources of patterns abstracted in big data.

Building on this, *Hand* engages with how digital data is socialised in our everyday practices through engagement with our digital devices. He shows how qualitative methods (such as in-depth interviews) can contribute greater understanding of such practices (e.g. how smartphones mediate social life) and their ongoing re-negotiation of the digital in daily routines.

Part V, the final section, considers invisibilities, gaps and ways of knowing. *Hillyard* considers the possibilities of rural digital research, suggesting this might be on the edges of the reach of big data. Exploring issues as diverse as birdwatching and gun crime gives the chapter breadth but also makes it challenging for those new to these topics.

Finally *Taylor & Hamilton* consider the area of Human Animal Studies, a topic perhaps on the edges of interest to the readers of QROM though we were intrigued by similarities between this and discussions of sociomateriality in organization studies. The digital research potential in this area seems to be only just emerging despite, as the author's note, our penchant for posting pictures of our pets via all forms of social media.

References:

- HINE, C. 2000. *Virtual Ethnography*, London, Sage.  
HINE, C. 2012. *The Internet: Understanding qualitative research*, New York; Oxford, Oxford University Press.