What is Digital Society?
Reflections on the aims and purpose of digital sociology.

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This year marks the 30th birthday of the World Wide Web, Tim Berners-Lee's key innovation which transformed the Internet from a relatively small network of computers used primarily for military and research purposes, to the global communications infrastructure it is today. This technological revolution formed the material foundation for a new type of society. An entire generation have now come of age in the *network society*, the *information age*, or to use a term more recently popularised in the social sciences, the *digital society*. This is a society characterised by information flowing through global networks at unprecedented speeds. New undergraduate and postgraduate courses are appearing that specialise in understanding 'digital society', 'digital culture', or 'digital media and society'. New fields of research have proliferated and grown into the disciplines of 'digital sociology' and the 'digital humanities'. Correspondingly, we are seeing the publication of an increasing number of textbooks that attempt to delineate the key themes, methods and boundaries of this new mode of sociological inquiry.[1] While these texts achieve these aims successfully, they often leave unaddressed the broader theoretical questions that the formation of a new field in social science raises. At the heart of social science is the study of modernity: the productive forces and processes of rationalisation that have increasingly enveloped the world's populations since the emergence of industrial capitalism. How does this new type of 'digital society' relate to these processes? Does the degree to which human activities are now recorded and connected via an increasing array of devices signal a new logic

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[1] See, for example, Marres, N. (2017) *Digital Sociology.* Cambridge: Policy Press; Lupton, D. (2014) *Digital Sociology.* New York: Routledge; Selwyn, N. (2019) *What is Digital Sociology?* Cambridge: Polity Press.

of techno-social development, or is this the continued rationalisation of society? Has the sheer speed at which information can now be produced and exchanged given rise to new social relations, or has the acceleration of production been at the heart of capitalism all along? Such questions are vital if digital sociology is to offer more than descriptive case studies and develop explanatory frameworks for understanding the cumulative impact and trajectory of new developments in technology and society. The texts reviewed here achieve this. They each identify key characteristics of digital society and theorise their broader implications for social progress. Each of these texts charts the historical development of particularly striking aspects of contemporary techno-social relations. Attwood's *Sex Media* demonstrates the effectiveness of understanding the increasing technical mediation of sex and intimacy, and the various practices emerging in this context, via broader processes of rationalisation, such as regulation and juridification. Wajcman and Dodd in *The Sociology of Speed* similarly analyse one of the most distinctive features of contemporary life not by contrasting it to former social relations, but by detailing how *acceleration* has always been at the heart of modernity. The most definitive feature of digital society however is the extent to which people across the world are now *connected* by new devices. In making this the central focus of her work Chayko's *Superconnected* is immediately a key text for digital sociology. *Superconnected* is an encyclopaedic guide to digital society, a society characterised by new forms of 'techno-social life' unlike those of previous eras. Yet Chayko offers something other contributions to digital sociology do not, she invites her readers to actively participate in shaping this new society. She does this by mapping the new spaces in which people can assemble and express themselves, and the various obstacles they may face. The result is an inspiriting compendium of what characterises digital society. This is the focus of the first section of this review, which examines how Chayko and Attwood in particular define digital society. Ultimately, I argue that while this is a rich and useful characterisation it lacks an engagement with broader historical forces. A second section addresses this issue, drawing out key insights from Wajcman and Dodd's edited collection to question whether digital society consitutes a break with modernity. The value of the three texts for the emerging field of digital sociology is then considered in a concluding section.

What Characterises the Digital Society?

'Perhaps the most likely predictions that could be made regarding tech societies of the future', Chayko claims, 'involve ever-increasing surveillance' (2018: 205). The economic imperative for big data is driving the development of increasingly sophisticated, subtle, and pervasive forms of data mining. As these techniques diffuse throughout society, it will become less feasible to opt-out, as crucial ways of participating in society – from basic healthcare to intimate relationships – are mediated more and more by devices that record our movements and everyday exchanges. Embodying this process are the growing array of devices which comprise the 'internet of things' and 'smart cities', linking mundane objects in our environments to networks of data analysis and in the process making our everyday

lives ever more 'superconnected'. This new 'techno-social' arrangement is the backdrop of digital society, against which various social issues must be understood.

It is to Chayko's credit that *Superconnected* introduces many social issues that now feature daily in public discourse. From 'fake news' and online 'echo chambers' that threaten the functioning of democracies, to new forms of addiction that permeate digitally mediated forms of gambling and consumption, *Superconnected* provides a comprehensive overview of the issues that comprise digital society. This makes it an important contribution to the emerging field of digital sociology – perhaps the most comprehensive so far – and an invaluable starting point for undergraduate students. Chayko's work also successfully demystifies these new areas of social interaction, challenging some of the more hyperbolic claims that feature in mainstream news cycles. One area in which this is particularly pertinent relates to new forms of intimacy. Chayko draws on her own primary data to explore intimate relationships that are digitally-mediated, as well as new forms of harassment, such as 'flaming': negative and harsh comments intended to intimidate; and 'trolling': persistent attempts to use such language to derail conversations. Chayko highlights the challenges these new practices pose for public authorities, while also emphasising that overall, people have reported more positive than negative uses of digital media in relationships.

Debunking the sensationalist myths that have emerged around the use of digital media in contexts of intimacy is also the key aim of Attwood's *Sex Media.* Attwood contextualises these myths within a broader history of patriarchy and moral panics, and draws on this history to discuss specific practices that have proliferated online. One of her most insightful examples concerns 'sexting', the sending of naked or semi-naked images via mobile phones. Attwood recalls the shocking stories that have given rise to moral panics, including three accounts of young girls driven to suicide after images they had sent in confidence to their respective partners were circulated among wider networks. Having discussed studies which reveal the majority of sexting to take place as part of stable relationships, Attwood argues that

> It is clear from the evidence that the problems are caused not by the sending and receiving of images but by harassment and bullying, by the failure of adults and institutions to protect the young people involved, and by the blaming of the girls whose images are circulated without their consent. (2018: 54)

This astute reasoning is repeated throughout the book, with processes of 'sexualisation' for example – in which young people are assumed to become more rapidly 'sexualised' due to exposure to certain forms of media – countered with studies showing falling rates of sexual activity among young people. By challenging conventional narratives in this way, and demystifying new practices with empirical evidence, Chayko and Attwood both provide works which would enhance policy debates. Both authors stress the important role established media and public institutions must play in shaping digital society.

For Attwood, this is discussed in Foucauldian terms of juridification: prominent discourses and techniques of surveillance serve to regulate sex in various ways. It follows that resistance to forms of oppression such as patriarchy are to be found in local forms of creative performativity. Chayko too spends much of her time in *Superconnected* impelling her readers to 'network, create, remix, act', calling on individuals to creatively appropriate the devices and programs they encounter in order to build the type of digital society they want to live in. In both cases capitalism is the elephant in the room. While Chayko touches on important trends such as increasing surveillance, and Attwood theorises the power of discourses, the economic imperatives guiding the production and use of the technologies in question are insufficiently addressed.

In Chayko's case this weakens her overall argument, which celebrates new forms of agency and invites readers to take a more active role in shaping technical developments. Such a call for the democratisation of technology is, of course, of crucial importance in an age of unprecedented inequality and environmental collapse. Yet such a project surely requires a politicisation of technology, whereby the economic imperatives guiding production are challenged and replaced by more progressive priorities, or at least curtailed by new regulatory frameworks. In the absence of such critique, Chayko's call to action remains largely targeted at the local level of small-scale appropriations and political consumption, lacking a vision for digital society beyond a slightly more invigorated public sphere. In this way, both texts – like much of digital sociology in general – suffer from an engagement with modernity. The forces of production and broad processes of rationalisation which continue to define social relations in so many ways, are left unquestioned.

Modernity and the Digital

As stated earlier, digital society is characterised by information flowing through global networks at unprecedented speeds. For many influential scholars, this constitutes a break with modernity. Famously, Manuel Castells proclaimed this technological revolution to be comparable with those that ushered in the modern age, and this is echoed in the more recent popularisation of terms such as the 'third industrial revolution' and 'post-capitalism' by bestselling authors such as Jeremy Rifkin.[2] Prior to this, philosophers such as Jean-François Lyotard had already argued that electronic media was eroding the foundations of knowledge that held 'modernity' together, thus indicating an historic break from modernity.[3] Yet how true is this? Does unprecedented speed in the production, dissemination and exchange of information truly signal a new system of social relations?

A logic of connectivity and speed was already observed as a defining characteristic of modernity in the work of Georg Simmel. Embodying this new logic was money.

[2] Castells, M. (1996) *The Network Society.* Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell; Rifkin, J. (2011) *The Third Industrial Revolution*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

[3] Lyotard, F. (1984) *The Postmodern Condition*. Manchester University Press

Wajcman and Dodd examine Simmel's work in their opening chapter to *The Sociology of Speed*, to highlight how the circulation of money rapidly widened communities by connecting people to broader networks of goods and services, increasing the speed of economic life, and consequently transforming how time was experienced in emerging urban centres. A sense of instability and acceleration now permeated an increasingly fluid culture, and while this greatly benefited the growth of commerce, language, law, and science – fields Simmel grouped together as 'objective culture' – it did so at the expense of 'subjective culture', the 'spiritual and ideal life of the individual'. In words that ring true in our contemporary era, the 'sensory overload the city exposes us to' renders much of our experience meaningless as 'motion becomes absolute' (2017: 16). [4] Wajcman and Dodd introduce Walter Benjamin here to explain how this renders time 'empty' of meaning as it is reduced to a dizzying procession of continuous innovations geared toward indiscernible ends. That we must relentlessly increase the pace of life to be more efficient and productive in the name of progress is unquestioned, even as what we are progressing toward remains unclear. What makes this perception of time more pernicious is its 'homogeneity', not only does it frame our present circumstances, it reframes the entire history of humanity by situating its subjects in one continuous sequence of linear progress. It is this particular conception of progress, imbued with a peculiar sense of continuous, sequential, accelerating time, that Wajcman and Dodd identify as defining of the modern era, thus demanding its own inquiry, a 'sociology of speed'.

This framework allows for new forms of resistance and liberation to be appreciated, with Benjamin's concept of the 'dialectical image' discussed as an aesthetic means of challenging people's understanding of time, awakening them to new interpretations of history and progress. Particular practices too, such as *flâneurie* – a nineteenth century fashion for strolling around cities pensively – can here be understood as protesting the logic of acceleration. Although Paul Lafargue is not mentioned in the collection, this analysis evokes his classic (1883) essay *The Right to be Lazy* and its omission is made more surprising in chapter two when Hartmut Rosa takes on its central conundrum.[5] Why, Rosa asks, do time-saving devices end up *increasing* demands on our time? In answering this question Rosa presents the book's first theory of speed for the late-modern era.

For Rosa, the reason for our disappearing leisure time (specific moments in which we can pursue activities for their own sake) lies in the tendency for new technologies to increase the range of legitimate claims that may be placed on our time. 'Before the telephone', Rosa explains, 'let alone the internet, chatting with our friends once we were at home was not an option – and hence there was no legitimate expectation on either side' (2017: 28). While on the one hand new communications devices save us time, on the other they dramatically increase expectations, and consequently the

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[4] To pursue this contemporary parallel see chapter nine of Chayko's *Superconnected,* 'More Benefits and Hazards of 24/7 Superconnectedness'.

[5] Lafargue, P. (1883) 'The Right to be Lazy', in Lafargue, P. (2011) *The Right to be Lazy: Essays by Paul Lafargue.* Edinburgh: AK Press.

claims that are made on our time. In turn, this produces fresh demand for time-saving devices as we struggle to accommodate these new demands. Modernity is in this way defined by a 'logic of escalation' for Rosa. A society is modern 'when it systematically requires growth, innovation, and acceleration for its structural reproduction' (ibid. 32). Rosa terms this the 'mode of dynamic stabilisation'. Unlike Lafargue however, Rosa does not attribute this to the imperatives of capitalist reproduction. Instead, Rosa emphasises the cultural, as well as material, roots of dynamic stabilization, standing closer to Weber than Marx. A 'sociology of speed' thus serves as framework for understanding how acceleration functions as a key measure of progress in contemporary society.

The material manifestation of speed as an organising principle is demonstrated most clearly in Donald MacKenzie's contribution to the collection, a case study on high frequency trading (HFT) presented in chapter four. Here we see imperatives for speed delegated to algorithms, as computers engage in automated trading processes at frequencies beyond the capacity of individual human actors. MacKenzie illustrates in detail how the imperative for speed is prioritised ahead of reliability, design trade-offs that highlight the degree to which these networks are socially constructed. New possibilities for speed offered by innovations in computation further incentivise acceleration, a process of co-production that entails the further diffusion of speed as a guiding principle across networks of finance capitalism.

Across institutional contexts too, including the public sector, speed becomes an 'existential absolute'. This is charted by Paul Du Gay in chapter six, whose analysis of contemporary managerial and organisational discourse reveals how careful deliberation – the raison d'être of bureaucracy – is side-lined in a culture of disruptive innovation, performance and delivery. A discussion of the decision process undertaken by Tony Blair's government ahead of the Iraq War incisively illustrates this point. Across the broader private sector, we also see speed elevated as the key measure of accomplishment. In chapter seven, Melissa Gregg traces this process back to the emergence of 'scientific management' in the workplace and makes the compelling argument that the development of self-tracking techniques, among other technical innovations, demonstrate how Taylorism has transformed into a more pervasive yet subtle form of disciplinary power. An intriguing aspect of this argument is how it offers a convincing explanation for the rise in popularity of meditation and 'mindfulness' as people seek to escape the relentless pursuit of productivity. Such insights contribute to the broader theoretical understanding of contemporary techno-social relations presented in *The Sociology of Speed*, a collection that provides a new approach for interpreting the overarching rationalities of digital society. The benefits of this approach are clear, as outlined here, and contribute much to our understanding of digital society not as a radical break from the social relations that characterised modernity, but as the outcome of forces originating in those relations.

Reflections for Digital Sociology

The case for digital sociology as a new field in the social sciences is presented in works such as Chayko's *Superconnected* via the sheer amount of new practices that require analysis. Digital society, understood as an emerging sphere of interaction mediated by the internet, patently requires academic study. Moreover, as we are witnessing day-by-day key institutions at the heart of democratic societies continue to struggle with increasing digitisation. If for nothing more, texts such as *Superconnected* and *Sex Media* demonstrate the necessity for a robust digital sociology to inform policy debates. Who is ultimately responsible, for example, when thousands of people share disinformation across a privately-owned platform? Where should the line be drawn between the freedoms afforded by online anonymity and the necessity for accountability? Questions such as these are urgent and it is vital that they are addressed with the rigour and impartiality of academic scholarship. Digital sociology must offer more than this however.

The sheer speed at which digital technologies are developed and then diffuse throughout societies means that digital sociology cannot be a reactive discipline. As insightful as local case studies are for informing policy, without a critical engagement with the logic and imperatives driving production the development of digital society is ceded to the operatives of surveillance capitalism.[6] Such critical engagement should be twofold, involving not only a broader theorizing of the rationalities and productive forces underpinning digitisation but also a call for the democratisation of technology. Chayko's work stands out within digital sociology for providing the latter, but is somewhat lacking in the former. Conversely, Wajcman and Dodd's collection provides an innovative framework for interpreting the logic pervading contemporary techno-social relations, yet even when the destructive consequences of this logic are discussed in relation to conditions of labour or the environment, resistance is largely undertheorized. This is except for Saskia Sassen's contribution, chapter five in *The Sociology of Speed*.

Sassen's chapter is perhaps the least effective at progressing the overall aim of *The Sociology of Speed*, yet it presents an inspiring call for action that reminds us what digital sociology can achieve. Sassen combines critique with particular pragmatic concerns, such as the 'insufficiency of applications that meet the needs of low-wage workers and low-income neighbourhoods' (2017: 73), and understanding how material infrastructures can enable direct engagement between networks of 'immobile local activists'. While *The Sociology of Speed* interrogates the underlying rationality of contemporary techno-social relations, Sassen's chapter stands out as an attempt to intervene, problematize and redirect the path to progress. If digital society is to be something more than the infrastructure for surveillance capitalism, digital sociology must follow this approach.

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[6] That is, the ongoing commodification of everyday interactions via digital devices. Zuboff, S. (2019) *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. London: Profile Books.