

Digitizing Academia

Schweizerische Gesellschaft für
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It has become obvious nowadays that digital technologies penetrate every aspect of social life in Switzerland, from work, leisure and consumption, to communication, social relations, governance and political participation (Fussey and Roth 2020). Digitalization has also impacted on the academic world regarding teaching, research and conferences, which is a central theme of this issue of the Bulletin of the Swiss Sociological Association. The aim is to discuss the digital turn in how it affects “doing sociology” continuing the self-reflexivity of the discipline started in former issues of the Bulletin¹. After introducing what is meant by “digital” and its topical relevance as an object of study in sociology, we will question how sociologists themselves are using social and other digital media as part of their work, in teaching and research practices, as well as in conference organization and participation. What new (if any) theories, methodologies, and pedagogies have been brought about by digitalization?

As highlighted by a recent special issue on the topic by the *British Journal Sociology*, the rapidity of technological innovation makes it difficult to grasp an exhaustive definition of the digital. Components of the digital are more easily identifiable, including hardware, software and practices such as “Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), computer mediated communication (CMC), the internet and the web, social media, Big Data, artificial intelligence (AI), computational

decision-making and, increasingly, nanotechnologies” (Fussey and Roth 2020: 660).

These technologies have given rise to hopes on the democratization of knowledge and political mobilization, but just as many fears regarding the perpetuation of inequalities and oppressive consequences such as the digital divide, class, racial and gender discrimination through biased algorithms, cyber harassment and surveillance related to datafication, or fake news (Halford and Savage 2010; Roth and Luczak-Roesch 2020; Scheerder et al. 2017).

The “digital” became an area of research in sociology around 30 years ago, as the emergence of the World Wide Web (1989), invented by Tim Berners-Lee and towards transforming the small network of computers used primarily for military and research purposes into the global network it is today – used for all forms of communication (Bloomfield 1989). Since then, digital sociology has focused on the constraining and enabling effects of technologies (named “affordances” by Gibson 1977; Hutchby 2001) in various social spheres and how they shape and are shaped by social relations and structures. The resulting power relations and inequalities – how they are developed, reproduced or exacerbated in this context – is also a central theme (DiMaggio et al., 2001). Digital society is characterized by Castells by the notion of superconnectivity (*network society*), the amount of information (*information age*), speed and technologies, whereby everyday lives become more and more enmeshed with technologies. The role of technologies is ambivalent: whilst on the one hand these technologies ease daily life and can save time, they can also put pressure on efficiency and hyper-connectivity. In other words, these digital

1 See Bulletin 150 on Methods training and formation in sociology (<https://www.sgs-sss.ch/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/bu-150-web.pdf>) and Bulletin 155 on Professional career paths and the labor market for sociologists (<https://www.sgs-sss.ch/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/SGS-Bulletin-155.pdf>).

technologies “are becoming a constitutive part of what makes us human” (Miller and Horst 2012: 4). They have also become a constitutive part of academia.

In most Swiss Higher Education institutions, theories and methods related to digitalization are part of the curricula in sociology (at Bachelor’s, Master’s and Doctoral levels), covering such diverse questions as, for instance, “How can being networked be grasped analytically? What opportunities and challenges are offered, for example, by the traces of our digital presence that are generated in large quantities every day?”²; “How can we apply and reflect upon computer-assisted and experimental processes in the humanities and social sciences?”³; “What are the cultural, social and political issues raised by the characteristics of digital tools?”⁴; “What are the best digital practices needed for publication and data management plans?”⁵. Offers of training range from critical analysis of the changes brought by digitalization to skills in dealing with these changes or needs in teaching and research.

Digitalization has also become an important topic in sociological research in Switzerland, as illustrated by the development of research laboratories on the issue in different higher education institutions, as well as the recent Swiss National Fund’s research 77 entitled “Digital Transformation”⁶ which aims to trigger research on the changes, risks and opportunities brought about by digitalization in the fields of education,

economy and governance, ethics and trustworthiness. Some of the results of the projects on education will certainly be published in the next special issue on Digital Academia in the Swiss Journal of Sociology (expected in 2023)⁷.

Finally, our community also experienced digitalization through the last annual Conference of the Swiss Sociological Association (Social Injustice in Times of Uncertainty, Geneva, June 2021), including the opportunities and challenges that organizing and attending an online conference entails. The attendance broke all records with 480 registered participants, based in 28 different countries; with 92 sessions organized in parallel. Whilst we were able to participate in many sessions, “jumping” more easily from one to the other, we also experienced the limited possibilities offered for informal discussions. For more junior scholars, the aim of conferences as an opportunity for networking was attenuated.

To conclude, the teaching and research agenda in Swiss sociology demonstrates the growing importance of sociological analysis on the changes produced by digitalization, the potential sparked by technologies in various social spheres, and how these technologies shape and are shaped by our social relations and structures. The different contributions of this bulletin provide some answers to these questions, focusing on digital teaching and digital research.

The Contributions

In her contribution, Sophie Mützel (University of Lucerne) discusses the many changes provoked by digital research in sociology, which have become even more salient during the pandemic. She highlights the possibilities generated by digitalization

2 <https://portal.unilu.ch/details?code=HS211309>

3 <https://dhlab.philhist.unibas.ch/en/>; see also <https://digitalskills.unibas.ch/en/>

4 <https://www.unil.ch/formations/en/home/menuinst/masters/humanites-numeriques.html>

5 <https://www.unige.ch/lettres/humanites-numeriques/fr/cours-et-seminaires/certificat-de-specialisation/>

6 <https://www.nfp77.ch/en/the-nrp/portrait/>

7 http://szs.sgs-sss.ch/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Call_SJS_49-3_E.pdf

for both qualitative and quantitative research. She mentions first how digitalization allows us to communicate more easily across different geographical regions or, in other words, to “zoom around the globe”. Second, digitalization provides more and different types of data: offline activities” such as surveillance camera footage allow “remote ethnography”, whilst large scale data sets also become opportunities for empirical data analysis. Third, according to her, digitalization pushes us to reflect on old ethical issues in doing research, such as the effects that research(ers) has(have) on their participants, but also new ones related to the use of digital computing and platforms. She discusses the development of new methodological toolkits in order to frame ethical slippages. This confirms the importance to continue to develop such reflection into curricula.

The contribution by Fabienne Malbois (University of Lausanne and HETSL/School of Social Work Lausanne) also discusses digital research, but with a focus on ethnographic research. Her paper shows the plurality of digital ethnography: the plurality of modes of data collection (by being remotely present, physically present, virtually present), the plurality of fieldwork and writing styles, as well as the singularity of different modes of doing digital ethnography. Finally, she argues that studying digital society requires embracing digital methods: “If the ethnographer seeks to say something about how the organization of everyday life is (un)done by the Internet, s/he must consider digital communication as an expression of a life-world”.

The third contribution, by Tobias Röhl, Franziska Zellweger, Gabriel Flepp and Santina Battaglia (Pädagogische Hochschule Zürich) examines the experiences of digital teaching of students at the Zurich University of Teacher Education. The authors explore the teaching in the context of an

emergency during the pandemic⁸, which involved remote teaching due to distancing measures. They question how the participants assess their learning experience and what preferences they express regarding the value of on-site or online formats for the future. The results of their survey indicate that the traditional mode of continuing education needs to be fundamentally rethought as a consequence of the emergency remote-learning experience. A mix of online and on-site learning is widely preferred by the participants in the survey. The results also show that the successful use of digital media in continuing education depends as much on the availability of tools as on the skills in using them, which pleads for support to be offered to both teachers and students in order to receive materials and improve their digital skills.

Finally, the contribution by Jimmy Clerc, Mathilde Bourrier, Leah Kimber and Cornelia Hummel (University of Geneva) reflects on the experiences of teaching during the pandemic at the Department of Sociology of the University of Geneva and the pedagogical innovations which sociology teachers were pushed to develop during this period. These range from using chat in e-sessions and involving students to moderate exchanges; organizing more virtual sessions with fewer students to allow discussion; putting in place flipped classes which focus on discussing what students have prepared at home; and setting up virtual sessions for informal exchanges on the lecture. According to them, the forced shift to distance learning has pushed teachers to develop even more interactive and reflective forms of teaching.

8 See also Bulletin 157 on the COVID-19 and inequalities in student lifestyles. <https://www.sgs-sss.ch/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/SGS-Bulletin-157.pdf>

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