Digital Social Research: Methods Core

Academic Year: 2015, Michaelmas Term
Day and time: Mondays, Weeks 1-8, 9:00-11:00
Location: L5, Mathematical Institute, Andrew Wiles Building, Radcliffe Observatory Quarter, Woodstock Road

Course Providers for Michaelmas Term

Dr Andy Przybylski (coordinator)  Dr Brent Mittelstadt
Gillian Bolsover (teaching assistant)  Dr Greg Taylor
Professor Rebecca Eynon  Dr Taha Yasseri
Dr Bernie Hogan

Comments and enquiries are directed in the first instance to the course teaching assistant.

Background

Digital Social Research: Methods Core is one of the six elements that make up Digital Social Research. A summary of the structure and assessment of Digital Social Research has been included as a separate coversheet.

Overview of Digital Social Research: Methods Core

Digital Social Research: Methods Core provides students with the opportunity to engage with the basic methodological underpinnings of quantitative and qualitative social science research practices in the context of Internet studies. This includes material on research designs and the development of research questions and empirical approaches across multiple methods. Students explore traditional social research methods that can be applied to the study of the Internet and related information and communication technologies (ICTs), but with an emphasis on emerging social research tools that can be applied to social research in digital spaces. They are introduced to all steps of research in ways that they can understand the inter-relationships across all phases of the research process.

Themes developed throughout this course include:

- The relationships between theoretical expectations, research questions, and empirical observations.
- The strengths and weaknesses of different methodological approaches.
- Theories and methods of sampling along with approaches to the study of whole populations.
- Data collection and management.
- Introductions to qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods of analysis.
- Theoretical and empirical concepts in quantitative and qualitative research.
- Ethical principles and norms across disciplines and in digital social research.
- Challenges to the reliability and validity of data and methods.
Course Objectives

1. Introduce a range of methods and tools that can be applied to a wide array of social science research issues;

2. Instil a balanced view of opportunities, problems and prospects in social science research methods on the Internet and related technologies;

3. Appreciate the ethical, legal and social issues related to digital social research and more generally, the use of social research methods to study ICTs and their social implications;

4. Bring experts into the class to introduce particular methods, while using core instructors and discussion to ensure an integration of material across the course offerings.

Teaching Arrangements

The course is team taught during Michaelmas term. There is one, two hour, session each week during weeks 1-8. The normal format of the sessions will begin with a lecture, followed by student discussion or group work. All students are expected to attend all of these sessions, whether or not they anticipate the use of a particular approach to research. In addition, there will be a number of workshop sessions to address questions and help students develop their practical research skills. They will be held on the odd weeks of term (i.e. 1, 3, 5, and 7). Further details about these workshops will be provided in Week 1 of term.

Note: Over the course of the year, small changes may be made to the content, dates or teaching arrangements set out in this reading list, at the course provider's discretion. These changes will be communicated to students directly and will be noted on the internal course information website.

Assessment

In Digital Social Research: Methods Core students are assessed on the basis of one summative assignment and one formative assignment during Michaelmas term. (Please note that the assessment for this course is different for DPhil students. DPhil students should please refer to the Graduate Studies Handbook for guidance).

They are as follows:

Formative Assignment

Students will be asked to complete one formative assignment during the course of Michaelmas term to assist them in the development of their research and writing skills. Specific details of this assignment, as well as the submission process will be provided in Week 1 of Michaelmas term. It will involve hands on experience in the conduct of research, a “foot in the door” to greater involvement, and summarized in an overview of the assignment paper no more than 1000 words. This assignment is due by noon on Friday of week 5 of Michaelmas term.

Summative Assignment

The summative assignment is one 5,000 word piece of written coursework, where students critically examine a methodological issue or relate methods to a substantive topic, selecting one question from a choice of four. This allows students to explore the applicability of different methods and gives them a chance to consider methods that they might apply in their thesis. This assignment will be worth 25%
of the final mark for Digital Social Research. Specific details of this assignment will be will be provided in Week 5 of Michaelmas Term. The assignment is due by noon on Friday week 8 of Michaelmas term.

Submission of Summative Assignment

All coursework and accompanying OII coversheet should be submitted in person to the Examinations School by the stated deadline. All coursework should be put in an envelope and must be addressed to ‘The Chairman of Examiners for the MSc in Social Science of the Internet C/o The Clerk of Examination Schools, High Street’. Please note that all coursework will be marked anonymously and therefore only your candidate number is required on the coversheet.

Please note that work submitted after the deadline will be processed in the standard manner and, in addition, the late submission will be reported to the Proctors’ Office. If a student is concerned that they will not meet the deadline they must contact their college office or examinations school for advice. For further information on submission of assessments to the examinations school please refer to http://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/exams/submission/. For details on the regulations for late and non-submissions please refer to the Proctors website at https://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/proctors/examinations/candidates/.

Any student failing this assessment will need to follow the rules set out in the OII Examining Conventions regarding re-submitting failed work.

Key Readings

A reading list is given below, those items marked with an asterisk (*) are essential reading and MUST be read by all students in preparation for the class. Items that are not marked with an asterisk are additional supplementary readings. There are four key texts used throughout the course. They are:


The two general social research methods texts (Bryman 2008; Robson 2011) have much overlap and cover topics beyond those specifically discussed in course sessions. We recommend that you use these texts to fill in topics not covered in class, and gaps in your previous training, but which can be of value to this course, such as in preparing your research paper.
Course Topics

Week 1: Introduction to Methods in Internet Research

Tutor(s): Dr Andy Przybylski & Professor Rebecca Eynon

Most mainstream approaches to social research can be used in the study of new information and communication technologies (ICTs). However, the Internet and related technologies are changing the ways in which we approach research, and raising new methodological issues. This first session of the seminar will outline 1) the subject matter of the course; 2) introduce examples of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed method research; and 3) discuss the challenges of studying emerging technologies, and conducting digital social research, providing an overview of new problems and opportunities.


(*) Ioannidis, J. P. Why Most Published Research Findings Are False. (2005). PLOS Medicine. DOI: 10.1371/journal.pmed.0020124


Week 2: Asking & Developing Research Questions

Tutor(s): Dr Andy Przybylski & Dr Bernie Hogan

The more immediate introduction to field research in the social sciences is to begin asking questions from a social scientific perspective. It is a core strategy of social researchers on and offline and in qualitative and quantitative methods in the social sciences. This session explores the issues of framing your research questions and carrying out qualitative interviews in face-to-face and online contexts. It enables students to gain a familiarity with important concepts such as reflexivity, interviewer effects and different kinds of interviews, including structured and unstructured approaches and interviewing experts. While the research process is often iterative, the question should guide other choices about methods. Differences between structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews and focus groups will be discussed as well as their analysis and we will discuss different types of research questions and how well your own research interests can be framed by a strong and ‘interesting’ set of research questions.

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Week 3: Research Designs, Sampling, & Experimental Approaches

Tutor(s): Dr Andy Przybylski

This session will provide an introduction to the most common research designs used in the Social Sciences; and explore issues of validity and reliability in research. It will also provide an introduction to sampling strategies for both quantitative research and advantages and disadvantages of different types of experiments (such as laboratory, field and quasi-field). The session will delve into the various challenges that arise in experimental research, particularly ethical issues and logistical problems. The virtues of random sampling will be emphasized, and explained, as will turns toward big data efforts to capture entire populations.


(Chapter 4: General Design Issues; Chapter 5: Fixed Designs; Chapter 6: Flexible Designs; Chapter 7: Multi-strategy (Mixed Methods) Designs; Chapter 8: Designs for Particular Purposes).


Available from: http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v489/n7415/full/nature11421.html

Week 4: Interpretive Methods

Tutor(s): Professor Rebecca Eynon

In this session students will be introduced to some of the philosophical foundations that inform the interpretative approach and outline some of the most common methodological approaches and methods that typically fit within this framework. Taking a critical approach, using current examples from Internet Studies, this session will examine the important role that interpretative research plays within the field and the opportunities and common problems that work in this area typically encounters. The initial themes identified in this session will be developed and expanded in the qualitative courses in HT.


Week 5: Survey Research

Tutor(s): Dr Bernie Hogan

Survey research is one of the most prevalent quantitative techniques used in the social sciences. This session will discuss the steps that need to be taken to construct and conduct high quality academic survey research both on and offline. Specific attention will be paid to pitfalls in relation to sampling, questionnaire design and item construction. Links are made between this methodology course and the statistics course that runs in parallel to understand the implications of questionnaire design and on the possibilities of statistical analysis. The Oxford Internet Surveys and the Me, My Spouse and the Internet Surveys are used as examples throughout the session.

(*) Fink, A.G. How to Conduct Surveys. 2006. London: Sage. (Chapters 2; Chapter 4)

(*) Dillman, Don A. Mail and Internet Surveys: the tailored design method (2nd edition). New York: Wiley. (Chapter 11: Internet and Interactive Voice Response Surveys)


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OxIS and WIP data available from: http://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/microsites/oxis.
‘Me, My Spouse and the Internet’ study available from: http://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/project.cfm?id=47.

**Week 6: Modeling in the Social Sciences & the Internet**

Tutor(s): Dr Greg Taylor & Dr Taha Yasseri

This session will cover (1) why social scientists use models; (2) formal or analytical models; and (3) simulation-based models. The instructors come from different but complementary intellectual traditions in modeling. The session will be focused on explaining what modeling is and the kinds of issues that researchers can address with it. The session stops short of actually teaching students how to do any kind of modeling, as this is a subject for more specialized courses. Readings provide background in the rationale for modeling in the social sciences, as well as strong examples of the application of modeling in Internet studies.


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Week 7: Ways of Knowing in the Social Sciences

Tutor: Dr Brent Mittelstadt

This session will provide an overview of debates about the scientific status of the social sciences, particularly in relation to the main methods covered on this course: statistics, network theory, experiments, and qualitative research. What are the epistemological bases for different ways of tackling the social world? What are the bases for the scientificity of qualitative, 'small n', studies? In what sense do big data, 'large n' studies, contribute to the scientific quality of research? What are the implications of different goals of research - whether research is more theoretically or practically oriented, for example - for its validity as knowledge and its contribution to social science? In conclusion, we shall consider how the use of online research tools might change the scientific nature of social enquiry.


Week 8: Ethics of Internet Research

Tutor(s): Dr Brent Mittelstadt & Dr Andy Przybylski

This session will consider some of the main ethical issues that researchers are likely to encounter in Internet-related research. These issues have been discussed now for some time and some guidelines for researchers have been established (AoIR ethics working group 2012). Yet there is still considerable debate about the ethics of Internet research – not least because the Internet and digital social research methods are continuing to evolve rapidly. In this session we will discuss some of the major issues that have been debated - as well as some that have only recently come to the fore - and discuss how to go about addressing them. This session will also provide an overview of the CUREC procedures that need to be followed prior to carrying out the dissertation.


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Zimmer, M. (2010) "But the data is already public": on the ethics of research in Facebook. Ethics and Information Technology, 12(4), 313-325.
