Social Research Methods and the Internet

Research Methods II

Academic Year 2013-14 Hilary Term
Day and Time: Mondays, 9.30-11.30
Location: Seminar Room, OII, 1 St Giles

Course Providers
Dr Jonathan Bright, Professor William H. Dutton (Co-ordinator), Dr Bernie Hogan, Professor Helen Margetts, Dr Eric T. Meyer, Dr Andy Przybylski, Professor Ralph Schroeder, Dr Greg Taylor, Professor Mike Thelwall, and Dr Taha Yasseri.

For comments and enquiries please e-mail william.dutton@oii.ox.ac.uk

Overview of Research Methods II

Research Methods II provides students with the opportunity to engage with the methodological, ethical and philosophical underpinnings of quantitative and qualitative social science research practices focused on study of the Internet and societal implications. This includes more advanced material on research designs and the development of research questions and empirical approaches across multiple methods. Students explore traditional social research methods applied to Internet Studies, but emphasis is placed on the use of emerging digital social research such as online methods. They are introduced in discussions of theory development, and the analysis, management and reporting of data, from both quantitative and qualitative traditions. Each week introduces a particular methodological approach.

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
- Threats 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 Hilary term. There is one, two hour, session each week. The formats of the sessions include lectures, student discussions and group work. All students are expected to attend all the sessions. In addition, students have the opportunity to participate in fortnightly workshops to develop their dissertation plans. More details about these workshops will be provided at the beginning 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
Course providers assess the students on the basis of one summative assignment and one formative assignment during Hilary term. They are as follows:

Summative Assignment
One 2,500-3,000 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 essay will be worth 25% of the final mark for Social Research Methods and the Internet. The essay is due Friday week 8 of Hilary term.

Formative Assignment
Students will be asked to complete three formative assignments during the course of Michaelmas term to assist them in the development of their research and writing skills. Specific details of these assignments (and the submission process) will be provided in week 1 of Hilary term. They 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 in three papers each no more than 1000 words.

Note that the assessment for this course is different for DPhil students. DPhil students should please refer to the Graduate Studies Handbook for guidance.

Submission of Summative Assignment
All coursework 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. Students should also ensure they add the OII coversheet at the top of the coursework. Please note that all coursework will be marked anonymously and therefore only your candidate number is required on the coversheet.
For further information on submission of assessments to the examinations school please refer to http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/schools/oxonly/submissions/index.shtml. Any student failing this assessment will need to follow the rules set out in the OII Examining Conventions regarding re-submitting failed work.

The 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 details on the regulations for late and non-submissions please refer to the Proctors website at http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/proctors/info/pam/section9.shtml.

**Key Readings**

A reading list is given below for each week of the course. 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 three key texts used throughout the course. They are:

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<th>Author</th>
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<tr>
<td>Lee, Raymond N.</td>
<td>Blank, Grant</td>
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The general social research methods text (Robson 2011) covers topics beyond those specifically discussed in course sessions. We recommend that you use this text to fill in topics not covered in class, and gaps in your previous training, but which can be of value to this course.

**TOPICS, METHODS II**

1. Ethnographic Research and Participant Observation (20 January)
2. Defining and Eliciting Networks (27 January)
3. Webometrics (3 February)
4. Experiments and Quasi-Experiments (10 February)
5. Mixed Method Research (17 February)
6. Modelling in the Social Sciences of the Internet (24 February)
7. Ways of Knowing in the Social Sciences and Big Data as Social Science (3 March)
8. Reporting Research and Shaping Policy and Practice (10 March)

**Week 1: Ethnographic Research and Participant-Observation**

Tutors: Dr Eric T. Meyer with Bill Dutton

Ethnographic approaches to research are often employed in the study of ICTs, particularly since they are well suited to the study of leading-edge developments. They also provide a means for complementing more quantitative survey research and experimental studies through the collection of more in-depth and contextualized observations.
This session will: 1) provide a brief overview of the ethnographic tradition; 2) explore the new opportunities and challenges the Internet has presented for those interested in carrying out ethnography; 3) examine the more practical aspects of how to go about an ethnographic study; 4) discuss novel methods that are being used to analyse web based data and how using these methods may actually be changing what ethnography originally set out to be; and 5) explore introduce some of the ethical considerations that arise in online ethnography.

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<td></td>
<td>• Chapter 16: The Nature of Qualitative Research</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Chapter 17: Ethnography and Participant Observation, pp. 400-34.</td>
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<td>Lee, Raymond N.</td>
<td>• Chapter 14</td>
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<td>Blank, Grant</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Prolog, and chapters 1 &amp; 2 Available online at:</td>
<td><a href="http://www.digitalculture.org/books/my-life-as-a-night-elf-priest">http://www.digitalculture.org/books/my-life-as-a-night-elf-priest</a></td>
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<td>• Available online: <a href="http://fmx.sagepub.com/content/21/2/181">http://fmx.sagepub.com/content/21/2/181</a></td>
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**Week 2: Defining and Eliciting Networks**

Tutor: Bernie Hogan with Jonathan Bright

The purpose of this lecture is to introduce students to the techniques for capturing personal networks and to provide an introduction to network analysis, more generally. Personal networks are a set of individuals with whom one communicates. It focuses on the elicitation of networks from surveys and interviews, providing a basis for related techniques introduced in the online social networks course, which focuses on networks derived from online sources. This lecture will cover name generators, position generators, visual methods and the concept of tie strength.

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<tr>
<td>Carrasco, Juan A.</td>
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<td>Wellman, Barry</td>
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Week 3: Webometrics

Tutor: Mike Thelwall with Jonathan Bright

Webometrics is the large-scale analysis of the links, sentiment and text in blogs, web pages, social networks and digital objects on the web. This seminar will explore the use of Internet-based tools, such as commercial search engines and web crawlers, to gather web data in order to analyse the online traces of specific social phenomena (e.g., language use, news consumption) or to analyse a specific type of online behaviour (e.g., political blogging, social network communication), including sentiment analysis. The legal and ethical issues associated with methods for large-scale analysis will also be discussed.


Week 4: Experiments and Quasi-Experiments

Tutor: Helen Margetts with Andy Przybylski

Experiments, originally associated primarily with science disciplines, have been developed as an important research method in psychology and economics and are now becoming increasingly popular in political science, sociology and other social sciences. This session will discuss the advantages and disadvantages of different types of experiments (such as laboratory, field and quasi-field) and the various challenges that arise in experimental research, particularly ethical issues and logistical problems. Different disciplines have developed distinct guidelines, norms and rules for designing and running experiments, particularly regarding deception, incentivization and scenario setting and these issues will also be discussed. The increased interactive nature of many internet applications (heralded as Web 2.0) has brought new possibilities for experimental research as well as introducing new challenges for the experimental method. Online experimental design remains a relatively unexplored field and in this session the reasons for the reluctance to use online experiments will be discussed. The aim of this part of the course is to give students insight into the value of experimental methodology; to consider the relative merits of alternative experimental designs; to think carefully about the key ethical issues arising in experimental research; and to consider the possibilities for internet-based experiments. Specific experiments on information-seeking behaviour and on-line mobilization carried out in OxLab are available as case studies. Students will be asked to design their own experiment as part of the seminar session.

* Margetts, Helen
Stoker, Gerry

- Experiments and Quasi-experiments

* Salganik, Matthew J.
Dodds, Peter S.
Watts, Duncan J.


* Colin Robson

- Review sections of Chapter 5 on True Experiments and Quasi-Experiments, pp. 104-117.

**Case studies**

Margetts, Helen Z. et al

“How many people does it take to change a petition? Experiments to investigate the impact of on-line social information on collective action”. 2009. (paper presented to European Consortium of Political Research general conference, 10-11th September): Available from HM.

NAO

“Government on the Internet: progress in delivering information and services
Social Science Experiments in Oxford

There are two laboratories for running social science experiments in Oxford: OxLab (run by OII and the Said Business School) and the Centre for Experimental Social Science (in Nuffield College), which also runs a seminar series where leading experimental researchers present papers and Oxford experimentalists present their research designs. For more information, including guidelines for running experiments, and to participate in an experiment, take a look at:

http://oxlab.oii.ox.ac.uk/public/
http://cess-wb.nuff.ox.ac.uk/experiments.html

For an interesting list of online experiments see:
http://psych.hanover.edu/research/exponnet.html
http://genpsylab-wexlist.unizh.ch/

Week 5: Mixed Method Research

Tutors: Bill Dutton with Eric Meyer

The final session will provide an overview of key methodological issues and move to a discussion of why and how to combine multiple traits and multiple methods in your research. When is it useful to draw on multiple methods? What are the issues raised by blending competing views on how we know what we know? Finally, we will discuss some key issues in writing and disseminating research.

http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/89/


Experiments in Political Science


Week 6: Modelling in the Social Sciences of the Internet

Tutors: Greg Taylor and 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.


* Chapters 7 and 8: Discourse Analysis I and II Collective Emotions Online and Their Influence on Community Life, PLoS ONE 6(7): e22207, July 2011


Week 7: Ways of Knowing in the Social Sciences

Tutor: Dr Ralph Schroeder

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.


- Part 1 & 3
- Chapter 5: Network Analysis


Week 8: Reporting Research and Shaping Policy and Practice

Tutor: Bill Dutton and Team

The challenges of communicating the results of research in ways that can influence theory, policy and practice are underestimated. While this activity is always last in any set of steps in social research, it must be anticipated from the earliest stages. Also it is clear that dissemination increasingly begins at the launch of a project and carries through well beyond the completion of publications. This session will focus on issues of relevance to student papers, particularly on communicating the results of your research, but also place this in the broader context of the challenges facing social research more generally.
Course providers will be invited to the last session to discuss their views on dissemination and outreach, and address any issues across the entire course.

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<th>Author</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Chapter on ‘Reporting and Disseminating’, pp. 495-513.</td>
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<td>• Chapter on ‘Writing the Report’, pp. 121-31</td>
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<td>• Chapter on ‘Composing the Report’, pp. 127-52</td>
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