

## Information and the Transformation of Sociology

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Information has shaped sociology in two key ways: first, it has become an object of study, largely in the form of accounts of 'the information society', which is concerned with exploring how the enhanced significance of information is shaping the social; and, second, through challenging the research methods that lie at the heart of sociology.

One doesn't have to subscribe to notions of epochal shift (from, say, an industrial to an information or network society) to see how information is transforming social organisation across many of the realms of social life that are the focus of the work of social scientists.

In my area there are two key ways in which sociology is being transformed by information, which are explored in my paper. One, relating to the mass media, is the notion of interactivity. New media are transforming the one-to-many model of the press and broadcasting with the interactivity that they afford. Authority is challenged, the power of traditional media organisations is diminished, and cultural and political engagement is facilitated as consumers become producers too. Whilst we can celebrate what Axel Bruns has called 'producers' (as in the Arab spring uprisings), at the same time journalism is the first casualty of the Internet: media organisations, to cut costs in the context of diminishing audiences and reduced advertising revenue, are spending less on journalism. So information is circulated as never before, but Yahoo et al employ no journalists. Facts are less verified, analysis has become less professional or sophisticated, news organisations carry less authority, and arguments are less balanced as a cacophony of voices, with little in the way of professional standards, replaces professional reporting.

The second way in which sociology is being transformed by the growth of information has been discussed most by Mike Savage and Roger Burrows. They argue that sociology was developed with the interview and the sample survey. These tools were not just developed by sociologists, but have been deployed mainly by them. More recently, however – starting probably with focus groups – we have seen the development outside the academy of new methods. It is not just data gathering methods that are now more widespread. Data, too, is now gathered in abundance by a breadth of official and commercial organisations. With its Clubcard data, Tesco can map consumption patterns onto postcodes, and in real-time, allowing far more elaborate, up-to-date and granular categorisations of the population than facilitated by, for example, the decennial census. The data gathered by Google or Facebook are other examples. In my own field Ofcom, the regulator of communications, has a website with research data on telecommunications and broadcasting that far exceeds that which has been generated by academics. And Sysomos and social media tracking software can track the 'buzz' that is being generated on the web around any event, by analysing, in real-time and in about 30 languages, what is being talked about, and the geo-demographics of those involved. On the one hand the vast amount of data affords new possibilities for sociologists; on the other hand one can question where does this leave sociology and its *raison d'être* in an era of such abundant data-gathering.