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Methodology Appendix: On the Craft of Sociology in the Digital Era

Jessie Daniels
Hunter College

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Cyber Racism

White Supremacy Online
and the New Attack on Civil Rights

Jessie Daniels
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A proliferation of on-netizen.co.com are leading the way. And African American activism online, organizing the Million Man March in 1999. Today it is black women and activism on the Dunbar Village mainstream media indifference to civil rights activists.

Dr. King Jr.'s vision and reject the starless midnight of racism, civic engagement online of- ism to make that vision real. The site supremacies online compels us to evaluate knowledge claims within multiple literacies, how we articulate or not will determine whether victories and the ideals of democracy clinch them in the dawn of a

Methodology Appendix: On the Craft of Sociology in the Digital Era

Sociologists are still deciding which methods are suitable for the task of investigating society in the digital era. The social world is changing because of the Internet, and sociological methods for studying patterned human behavior must change as well. Yet sociologists have been slow to take up the challenge of Internet research, as DiMaggio and colleagues have observed. There are many possible reasons for this including, perhaps, a distrust and anxiety about the new. Ben Agger poses the question, "Does the Internet require that we revise sociology's and social theory's categories?" That can seem a daunting task to those contemplating a study that includes some Internet component. Sociologists of a certain generation may also view the Internet as something for the young or the not-sufficiently serious. A former colleague of mine assured me the Web was a fad and urged me to abandon my interest in it if I wanted to be taken seriously as a scholar. That was in 1997, and he was wrong, as it turns out. Although some of these concerns may explain part of sociology's failure to take up the challenge of Internet research, I think there is another reason still.

One of the main barriers to the sociological study of the Internet has to do with the fact that there is not, as of yet, a well-developed sociological method for studying patterned human behavior involving the Internet. While there are some empirical studies in the sociology of the Internet, including large-scale, quantitative studies of people's Internet skills, content analysis of the Web,
ethnographies of online games, studies of community formation among Filipinos in diaspora, and neighborhood-based use of new media as well as some impressive theoretical contributions about understanding the social implications of the Internet by some of the leading figures in sociology, there is comparatively little about the sociological research methods most appropriate for studying the Internet. The field of Internet studies is also widely (even wildly) interdisciplinary, and some sociologists may be daunted by the prospect of venturing beyond disciplinary boundaries. While in the rest of this book I have drawn on a broad range of literature from diverse disciplines, including library science, psychology, cultural studies, and communications, this appendix is intended for my fellow sociologists and those interested in sociological methods. In this appendix my goal is to contribute some notes toward the emerging craft of sociology in the digital era.

The study at hand draws on a range of sociological methods, including ethnographic observation of a white supremacist online forum; qualitative-discourse analysis of Web text and graphic design, layout, and images; secondary analysis of Web analytics; case studies; and autoethnography. In addition, I developed an innovative combination of experiment, usability study, and in-depth interview in which I asked young people who were participants to try and distinguish between legitimate civil rights websites and cloaked white supremacist sites. This appendix, then, is meant to offer much more detail about precisely what I did in conducting this research. The intended audience here includes the graduate student embarking on a sociological study of the Internet and more experienced sociologists who may be considering how to incorporate some aspect of digital media into an existing research agenda. My framework for this discussion is: (1) what other sociologists have to say about a particular methodological problem or issue of Internet research, (2) what I did in my research for this book and how I dealt with that issue, and (3) a suggestion for a general principle that may guide other researchers interested in conducting a qualitative sociological analysis that involves the Internet beyond the specific case of white supremacists or even social movements more generally. I follow this with a discussion about some of the ethical issues involved in doing such research.

Content Analysis of Social-Movement Discourse before and after the Web

There is a strong sociological tradition of analyzing social-movement discourse and framing of issues. And today there is a quickly growing body of
Community formation among Filipinos is also widely (even wildly) daunted by the prospect of venturing into the rest of this book I have focused on sociological methods, including library communications, online forum; qualitative design, layout, and images; sector interaction; and autoethnography. In addition to experiment, usability studies of young people who were part of social movements and, then, is meant to offer much inducting this research. The inductive embarking on a sociological problem or issue of individual action, sociologists who may be digital media into an existing social situation is: (1) what other sociological problem or issue of interest for this book and how I dealt with this issue. The general principle that may guide qualitative sociological analysis is the case of white supremacists or this with a discussion about wh...
one has no staff, it is a great deal of trouble; if one does employ staff, then the staff is often even more trouble." And, indeed, it is a great deal of trouble. Research involving the Internet can seem, in contrast, deceptively easy: turn on the computer, log onto the Internet, do some research. While some sociologists may still be under the misguided impression that studying new media is something one does sitting in front of a computer, there is, as Howard Becker has pointed out, a limit to what this method can accomplish. Sociologists who have engaged in ethnographic observation online have written primarily about online ethnography as participant observation, and as such one of the primary dilemmas for researchers so engaged is building rapport with subjects.

Instead of focusing primarily on white supremacists with websites as subjects, per se, I spent time in other online spaces to try to understand white supremacists in comparison to other groups. I was also reflexive about my own encounters with such sites online and, in particular, was interested in the ways that my students encountered white supremacy online both intentionally (by seeking it out) and inadvertently (by stumbling upon it). Thus, the kind of autoethnographic narrative that opens chapter 3, in which I describe my experience of my students' encounters of white supremacy online, is an experience that was part of an ongoing research process in which I formulated and reformulated questions about what I was investigating. I also spent much of the time I was working on this project immersed in Internet technologies (using them for personal connection and knowledge-seeking, teaching with them, reading, writing, and thinking with them, even briefly working in the industry). I systematically spent time and collected data (posts from Web-based discussion forums) at Stormfront. In addition, I kept up with changes in various white supremacist organizations through news reports, their own Web sites, and monitoring organizations such as the ADL, Simon Wiesenthal Center, and the Southern Poverty Law Center. Thus, the form that this (auto)ethnographic investigation took was one that led me down a number of different paths, but all brought me back to my central question about what it means—both for the Internet and for our understandings of race—that white supremacists are online.

There are a number of principles or guidelines to derive from such a methodology, including taking time to pay attention. While some may want to view white supremacy online as a separate, distinct subculture apart from mainstream society, I was interested in understanding how white supremacy online is similar to and part of mainstream American culture. In my methodological approach, online and offline worlds overlap in complex ways. Research that looks only at online worlds suggests a false dichotomy between
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how the Internet and society work in tandem.

Adapting the Cultural Diamond to the Digital Era

In an influential article Wendy Griswold developed the cultural diamond as
a methodological framework for the sociological study of culture. Griswold's
schema sets out four points for examining any cultural artifact, and in this
research, I have adapted this framework for studying the Web. Examining the
text of Web pages, discussion forums, and newsgroups is the most straight-
forward method, and it is also the most common way of studying white su-
premacy online.17 Much less common are studies of the Web user. In other
media, this type of research is called audience reception and explores how the
listener, viewer, or reader interprets the text, whether that text is visual (as in
films or television shows) or printed (as in novels or newspaper articles).
Sonia Livingstone has suggested that the terms audience and reception do
not work well for digital media for a variety of reasons, such as interactivity
(rather than one-to-many, with producer and receiver separate as in broad-
cast media).18 When it comes to empirical explorations of how people find,
read, and interpret extremist rhetoric on racist websites, there is scant re-
search. An important exception to this is the work of Lee and Leets, who
examine how adolescents respond to what they call persuasive storytelling
online by hate groups.19 More difficult and less prevalent are investigations into the
connections between online interaction and face-to-face social networks
among extremists.20

Among the questions I wanted to investigate in this study was how young
people make sense of white supremacy online. I was much less interested in
investigating how avowed white supremacists come to be part of an organ-
ized movement or how those in the movement first decided to start using the
Internet. My interest in how the young make sense of white supremacy on-
line originated in those classroom lab sessions back in 1997. I struggled for a
long time to come up with a way to investigate such an accidental discovery
in any sort of systematic way. Then I encountered the work of Dina
Borzekowski21 in 2004 and had the chance to meet her in 2005 at the
foundation where I was scholar-in-residence. It was there that Dina suggested I
use the talk-aloud method, and this sparked further ideas about how to con-
struct these interviews in conjunction with viewing cloaked sites. In January
and February 2006, I asked adolescents (ages fifteen to nineteen) to use the
Internet to search for information and to evaluate two preselected pairs of
websites about Dr. King and about the civil rights movement. I utilized a
mixed-method study design, which included search scenarios, paired website evaluations, and the talk-aloud technique (also referred to as think aloud). There were two search scenarios. The first asked participants to "find information on Martin Luther King as if you had a report to write for school." The second scenario asked participants to "find information about the goals of the civil rights movement as if you had a report to write for school." As they reviewed the results of their query returned by the search engine, I asked them questions about what they saw, what looked interesting to them and why, and which websites they would select to read.

After completing the search scenarios task, I asked the participants to evaluate the differences between pairs of websites. The first pair included the legitimate King Center site (thekingcenter.org) and the cloaked Martin Luther King site (martinlutherking.org); the second pair included the cloaked American Civil Rights Review site (americancivilrightsreview.com) and the legitimate Voices of Civil Rights site (voicesofcivilrights.org). I preselected these sites based on the similarity of content and traffic. For example, the traffic in 2006 to the websites for the King Center and the cloaked Martin Luther King site are nearly identical, with an overall peak in February, which is African American History Month.

I minimized the windows for all four websites on the computer and introduced pairs of sites to each participant. I made sure to change the sequence, introducing a cloaked site first, followed by a legitimate site, and then reversing the order. Some participants had already found these sites during the initial search scenario, and I asked them to look at the sites again, in relation to the paired website and talk aloud about which site they would choose as a source of information if they were forced to select one for a school report.

During both tasks, the search scenarios and the paired-website evaluations, I asked participants to talk aloud about what they were doing. The talk-aloud technique, which is common in usability studies of graphic user interface (GUI) website design and frequently used by marketing firms, asks Web users to describe what they are doing, seeing, thinking, reading, and clicking on—and why they are making those choices—as they navigate a website. Completing both tasks took participants approximately thirty to forty-five minutes. I recorded these sessions using a digital video camera, recording audio of the participants' voices and accounts of their searching and evaluating the Web, and capturing video images of the computer screens as they searched.

To analyze this data I transcribed the audio portion of the interviews and noted in the transcripts what was on the computer screen at the same time so that I could recall to which websites the participants were referring in their interviews. I also noted the images on the screen, coded the transcripts by theme across interviews and interviews. This process, although expensive, allowed the Web user in relation to the Web. Reviewing the video transcripts also provided additional insights about Internet searching during interviews.

Given that almost all of the online bulletin-board postings are samples of relatively digitally fluent, young people, I wanted to include a sample of relatively digitally fluent, young people. I also noted that the convenience sample was generalizable to all teens or even young women. All indicated that they were born in high school, in the eleventh grade, and were asked to travel to my faculty in the next city. However, the Pew Internet...
search scenarios, paired website (also referred to as think aloud), asked participants to “find information about the goals of the search engine, I asked them interesting to them and why, and asked, I asked the participants to websites. The first pair included the Center and the cloaked Martin sites on the computer and introduce sure to change the sequence, a legitimate site, and then readily found these sites during the look at the sites again, in relation to the visual images of the text and hypertext of the Web. Reviewing the video portion of the interviews and noting it in the transcripts also provided additional information about the way participants searched, navigated, read, and made meaning of search results or of a particular website.

I used a snowball sampling strategy to find participants for the interviews. Participants for the study were recruited through a variety of means, including through a youth-focused human-rights foundation, word-of-mouth, printed flyers, and online bulletin-board postings. The resulting convenience sample includes ten (N=10) participants. The majority (N=8) were recruited from the online bulletin board, one through word-of-mouth and one from the foundation. Almost all (N=9) were female and came from a variety of racial/ethnic backgrounds (one African American, one Asian-Chinese, two white, two Latina, and three South Asian); the one male respondent was Latino. All indicated that they were born in the United States, and all were enrolled in high school, in the eleventh or twelfth grade, at the time of the study. Participants under age eighteen who participated in the study were required to get parental consent and were guided through the informed consent process. Participants eighteen and over were guided through the informed consent process. Except for the participant at the foundation, all participants were asked to travel to my faculty office at a college campus in the city to complete the interview that lasted less than an hour. Participants usually arrived alone to the interview, although one participant brought her mother, who sat quietly while we completed the interview. Participants who completed the interview received a $20 stipend for their time and were given information about Internet searching during the debriefing following the interview. While I wanted to include a larger sample, constraints of both time and money prohibited more interviews. I hope to continue to develop this methodological approach in future research.

Given that almost all of the participants volunteered for the study via the online bulletin-board postings (newyork.craigslist.org), it is likely that this is a sample of relatively digitally fluent and Internet-savvy teens. Of course, because of the convenience sampling strategy employed, these results are not generalizable to all teens or even all teens using the Internet in New York City. However, the Pew Internet and American Life Project has conducted
large, national, random-sample survey research into the online practices of adolescents that found that of the majority (87 percent) of adolescents ages twelve to seventeen who were online in 2005 51 percent use the Internet on a daily basis and 76 percent get news or information about current events online. This is in contrast to adults, who are less likely to use the Internet, with 66 percent of adults using the Internet.23 This research also indicates that among older teens (fifteen to seventeen) girls are power users of the Internet and search for information about a variety of subject areas; they are more likely to use a greater variety of digital technology—including e-mail, instant messaging, and text messaging—than are their male peers.24 It is likely that the sample for this study includes participants who are similar in their Web usage to the national sample. In particular, the fact that I was able to recruit a majority female sample using an online bulletin-board posting suggests that these young women are typical of the power users identified in the Pew research.

There are a number of principles for the sociology of the Internet from this research. The key is that the Internet is a many-to-many medium (rather than a one-to-many medium, such as broadcast or traditional print) and draws an audience that is much more interactive than a television audience. For example, users are also often creators and producers. Therefore, our ways of studying Internet audiences need to become more sophisticated as well. Further, one of the key insights I gleaned from talking with the young people in this study is the importance of the Internet as a visual as well as text-based medium. Visual cues are important to young people who use the Internet. Our sense of what reading means needs to expand to include the interpretation of the visual, as long suggested by visual sociologists and cultural-studies scholars. And, finally, a further principle is that sociologists must recognize that text on a website is contested, that is read differently by different Web visitors. This is another reason that Internet-only content analysis of websites is a limited methodology at best.

You Never Step in the Same Internet Twice: Doing Sociology on Internet Time

"Sociology is slow journalism," Dale McLemore was fond of saying. And in many ways Dale—a professor of mine at University of Texas—was absolutely correct. Sociology often tackles subjects that have first been brought to light by journalists. We approach the study of the same subject much more slowly, because we like to think of ourselves (as a discipline) as being methodical and systematic. The relative slowness of sociology is a significant factor in keeping pace with the rapidly changing Internet. Manuel Castells has pointed out, "The speed of transformation has made it difficult for scholarly research to follow the pace of change with an understanding of the Internet's why and wherefores of the Internet." Even as I write this, the Internet is changing daily as websites are created and deleted. Yet sociology is the study of behavior before they change. In this study I dealt with this by not only understanding how the Internet worked, but also understanding how the Internet content changed. But the fact is that you have to make an argument against giving in to the Internet's fast pace.

The principle here for sociology on the Internet is that the medium is not a rapid pace of change. However, in the study of the Internet, as in any study of any medium, the key is to try and be quick. The key is to try and participate in the online community of the medium and the myriad data that sociologists systematically reflect this deeper understanding of pace of change.

Some Ethical Issues

Any research with human subjects, particularly if those subjects are adolescents, who were participants in this research, should be ethically sound. I took additional steps to ensure that these sites, and other sites that sociologists systematically reflect this deeper understanding of pace of change.

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into the online practices of 1 percent) of adolescents ages 13 to 17 use the Internet on a daily basis. The Pew report found that 66 percent use the Internet on a daily basis, with 66 percent also indicating that among users of the Internet and other media, they are more likely to use e-mail and instant messengers. It is likely that the same holds true in their Web usage as well. Further, one of the key findings of the Pew study is that the Internet is a mass medium (rather than an analytical, print-based medium) and draws an audio-visual audience. For example, with the Internet being able to recruit a majority of the audience of any medium (rather than a print-based medium), it is clear that the medium is changing the ways we study and understand it. The principle here for sociologists is to recognize that things change quickly on the Internet and that sociology cannot actually stay ahead of this rapid pace of change. However, it is possible to bring sociology's insights to the study of the Internet, as a number of scholars have already demonstrated. The key, I think, is to try and be part of the phenomenon, to create content and participate in online communities, in order to gain a deep understanding of the medium and the myriad ways it is changing society. This way the data that sociologists systematically collect and the knowledge we create will reflect this deeper understanding and rather than be undermined by the rapid pace of change.

Some Ethical Issues in Doing Online Research

Any research with human subjects carries with it certain ethical concerns, particularly if those subjects are minors. This research was no exception. While I would argue that there was no risk of harm to the young people who were participants in this research, it is possible that participants might find the websites unsettling. Given that possibility, following each interview, I took additional steps to ensure that participants were equipped to think critically about these sites, and others like them, should they encounter them again outside the parameters of the study. Specifically, I took deliberate steps to debrief each participant. I asked each participant if they were upset by anything they saw. I gave each participant a handout that included a tip.
sheet for critically evaluating Internet websites. And, finally, I had participants type the URL of one of the cloaked sites into TouchGraph, a free Web-based software program that graphically and dynamically maps the links to a site. All these efforts were intended to protect the human subjects participating in the study from any potential harm they may have experienced. Overall, study participants did not encounter any risk greater than that which they would have encountered in the course of their usual, everyday lives. And there were some potential benefits for the participants in terms of greater awareness about the presence of cloaked sites.

A portion of this research that involved content analysis of the websites was funded, and because of that, the initial phase of this research had to go through the Institutional Review Board at my institution. In my view, there is no reasonable threat of harm to any human subject in a study that involves a researcher looking at websites. The requirement that such a study undergo IRB review says more about the iron cage of bureaucracy than it does about any legitimate ethical concern regarding protecting human subjects.

Some Ethical Issues in Doing Research about White Supremacy

Given that my research questions about white supremacy have always been about the ideological constructions within movement discourse, interviewing individual white supremacists has never been an appropriate or necessary research method for answering my research questions. In addition, I found it ethically troubling to interview subjects that I disagreed with so fundamentally, lest I inadvertently lend support to their cause (as I wrote in my earlier book). This stance is a difficult one to sustain while doing research into white supremacy online, because, with the advent of discussion-board software that counts the number of users and guests logged on to a particular website, every visit to a white supremacist website becomes a de facto vote of support. Or, say, to the people who run and maintain those sites. Given this, I chose to remain an oppositional lurker at Stormfront (and at the other white supremacist sites, but it was somewhat less of an issue at these sites because of the way the sites counted users). That is, I never registered as a user at the site but instead read there as a guest. As an online guest I copied and pasted content from the forums as part of my data collection strategy, but I never had access to any personal information of anyone at the site and did not disclose any confidential information about anyone there. Some may challenge this use of these online forums as ethically questionable; however, I do not think it violates ethical standards of research. Others have also challenged me on the very enterprise of studying white supremacists because, my detractors argue, it is a schola

New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Ut
8. Hampton and Wellman ;
Supports Community and Social
9. Castells, Calhoun, DiMag:
10. Notable exceptions here in
Johns, Chen, and Hall (2004). Sti
11. To name just a few sch,
Francesca Polletta, David Snow.
12. McCaughey and Ayers 20X
17. For instance, Adams and
Solomos (1996), Bostdorff (2004
Weinberg, and Oleson (2003), ar
And, finally, I had participated in TouchGraph, a free Web application that maps the links to a website in a human subjectively readable manner. The human subjects participating may have experienced any risk greater than that of their usual everyday activities. The analysis of the websites of this research had to go through a process of analysis. In my view, there is no study that involves human subjects that such a study undergoes a more democratic form of public scrutiny than it does about human subjects.

Notes

10. Notable exceptions here include the work of Hine (2005), Ignacio (2006), and Johns, Chen, and Hall (2004). Still, the fact that there are only a handful of sociologists to list here well into the third age of the Internet makes the point about the relative lack of sociological methods for studying the Internet.
11. To name just a few scholars working in this tradition: Robert Benford, Francesca Polletta, David Snow.
23. Lenhart, Madden, and Hitlin 2005.