Pioneering Digital Sociology

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Jessie Daniels, a City University of New York professor, thinks sociologists should become more savvy about digital technologies.

Daniels is the author of two books about race and various forms of media, White Lies (1997) and Cyber Racism (2009). She also co-produces a scholarly blog, Racism Review, which is viewed by 200,000 individuals each month, and has received more than two million visitors. Forbes Magazine named her one of “20 Inspiring Women to Follow on Twitter.” She recently sat down with JustPublics@365 Program Coordinator Heidi Knoblauch in East Harlem to talk about sociology, the Internet, and the future of digital technologies.

HEIDI KNOBLAUCH: What first led you to engage with the Internet in your scholarship?

JESSIE DANIELS: As with so many things in life, it happened because of a friendship. Chris Toulouse was a colleague of mine when I taught at Hofstra University. We both lived in Brooklyn and did the reverse commute on the Long Island Rail Road out to Hofstra every day. In our many conversations, back in the mid-1990s, we frequently talked about the Internet and how it was changing society—along with the systematic study of society which, of course is what sociology is about. This was around 1997, when I published a book called White Lies, which is about white supremacist publications in print. I began to wonder how the groups I studied in that book were (or weren’t) making the transition to the Internet. That was the moment when I first started thinking about the Internet with regard to my research and also when I began to bring my students into computer labs and watch them surf the Internet. On one of the memorable first days in a computer lab, I watched one student sit down, type in Martin Luther King to a search engine, and stumble upon what I later came to call a “cloaked” web site. That is, it looks like a tribute site to Dr. King but is in fact hosted by white supremacists. I began to contemplate how scholars could get at the way people use the Internet and investigate how people come to find knowledge about race and ethnicity on the Internet.

HK: Why should sociologists take up digital technologies?

JD: I think there are a lot of reasons sociologists should be interested in and engaged in digital technologies and the study of the Internet. I believe the Internet is changing the way that we interact as human beings. In sociology we’re engaged in the study of patterned human behavior, and I think the Internet is changing those patterns of human behavior. So, at a really basic level of intellectual curiosity, sociologists have an obligation to see what’s up with the Internet and how it’s changing things. Methodologically, there are some really compelling ways the Internet and digital technologies can enliven standard
sociological research. A project that I’m working on right now is collecting data from feminists’ blogs using digital tools. This is light years ahead of traditional methods for doing content analyses of printed publications, where you simply count the appearance of words. With these new tools, we can collect much much more data—what some are calling “big data”—and analyze that data in ways that tell us different kinds of things.

Blogs represent networks of conversations among various bloggers, which is a richer level of detail than counting the number of times a word appears. New digital research tools also allow for wider collaboration; part of what I’m working on now is crowd-sourcing a history of feminist online activism that bloggers contribute to and create themselves. In addition, we also have new methods of visualizing data. Digital technologies can help us see what that data looks like visually, and tell us new things about patterns of human social behavior.

Finally, sociologists should be taking up additional ways that tell us different kinds of things. “big data”—and analyze that data in ways that tell us different kinds of things. Digital technologies can help us see what data looks like visually, and tell us new things about patterns of human social behavior. I am one of very few sociologists in a very interdisciplinary department. I don’t often teach courses on race and ethnicity, which I did for many years previously, so the blog is a way for me to continue to be involved in the field in ways that my academic appointment has taken me away from on a daily basis. The other way the blog interacts with my academic scholarship is that often blog posts I write end up being a draft of an academic peer-reviewed journal article. I’ve done this several times now, and for me it’s a great way to do first drafts of publications and get feedback from other people about the ideas I’m thinking about and develop them further. Related to that, I think the blog has made me a better writer overall. It’s really an excellent practice to help keep myself writing. Finally, I think that the way that the blog intersects with my academic scholarship is that it really opens up my academic scholarship to a much, much wider audience than would ever see my work in either books printed at academic presses or in peer-reviewed articles. The blog has really become a cornerstone of my academic scholarship.

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HK: You started a blog called *Racism Review* in 2007 with Joe Feagin. How does this blog connect to your academic work?

JD: *Racism Review* permeates my academic scholarship in a lot of ways. First of all, my main academic appointment right now is in a school of public health, where I am one of very few sociologists in a department and a lot of times the people that are closest to me geographically or institutionally don’t share my research interests. Through Twitter I can have conversations with other people who share similar research interests across space and time. For example, a lot of times at academic conferences we have short conversations with people in the hallway after an academic paper presentation and we look for ways to extend those conversations, sometimes through e-mail, sometimes through phone calls, some-

HK: You’re also lead on a new digital initiative at the City University of New York Graduate Center called JustPublics@365. Can you describe that project and its goals?

JD: JustPublics@365 is a project funded by the Ford Foundation as an experiment in reimagining scholarly communication in the digital era. We have many goals.
Chief among them is to help academics doing work related to social justice and equality connect their research to wider audiences who are interested in that and doing grassroots activism around those kinds of issues. One of the ways we’re accomplishing these goals is through a series of high-profile summits, such as “Re-Imagining Scholarly Communication for the 21st Century” and “Resisting Criminalization through Academic-Media-Activist Partnerships.” We’re also doing a series of workshops in collaboration with the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism, which we refer to as MediaCamp. These MediaCamp workshops help train academics and activists in a wide range of media skills, including both big media like writing an op-ed for The New York Times or appearing on camera on CNN or some other outlet, as well as digital media skills like blogging, Twitter and analyzing the metrics that come from those. Last year, we also ran a Participatory Open Online Course (POOC), which focused on inequality in East Harlem. The course was widely attended both in person and online.

What we’re doing by reimagining scholarly communication in the digital era is to begin a conversation about augmenting knowledge products and moving toward knowledge streams. In the twentieth century model of the university, the notion of the university as a knowledge factory was dominant. Faculty were in there producing widgets of knowledge, and measured our success by how many widgets of knowledge we produced—books and articles—and how many citations these widgets get. With JustPublics@365 we really want to start a new conversation about knowledge streams which is more of a twenty-first century model of thinking about knowledge flowing from the university as well as back into the university. People can step in and step out of those streams fairly easily; they’re open and accessible, rather than closed and locked up.

I don’t know that I’m inspiring anybody on Twitter, but Twitter has been an inspiration for me as an academic.