

Renewing Sociology in the Digital Age

#LSEBSA

Susan Halford

President, British Sociological Association, and Professor of Sociology and Director, Web Science Institute, University of Southampton

Chair: Mike Savage

Professor of Sociology and Director of the International Inequalities Institute, LSE

Hosted by the Department of Sociology



WEB SCIENCE
Institute

UNIVERSITY OF
Southampton

Renewing Sociology in the Digital Age

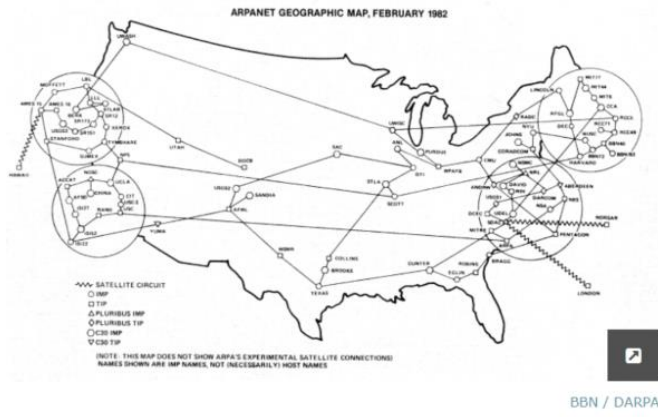
Susan Halford

Professor of Sociology, Director Web Science Institute

@susanjhalford

1: Introduction

- The birth of British Sociology – LSE 1904, 1907.
- Sociological Papers 1905-7 there was ‘...*divergence among the would-be builders of Sociology as to the boundaries and content of the field*’ (Abrams 1968; 106)
- Leonard Hobhouse ‘... *it is clear that the definition which is to satisfy everybody must come not at the beginning but at the end of discovery*’ (in Abrams 1968; p.108)
- 1909 syllabus: family, social structure, social control, beliefs.
- The social world refuses to narrow-down, stay still or make itself amenable to any one way of knowing, theoretical or methodological.



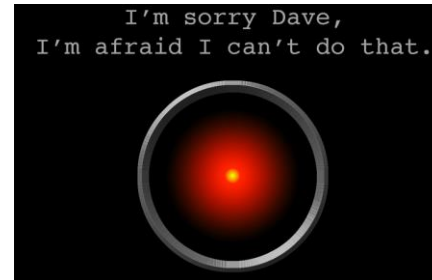
Source: <https://www.vox.com/a/internet-maps>

'There is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home' (Ken Olsen, founder of Digital Equipment Corporation, 1977)

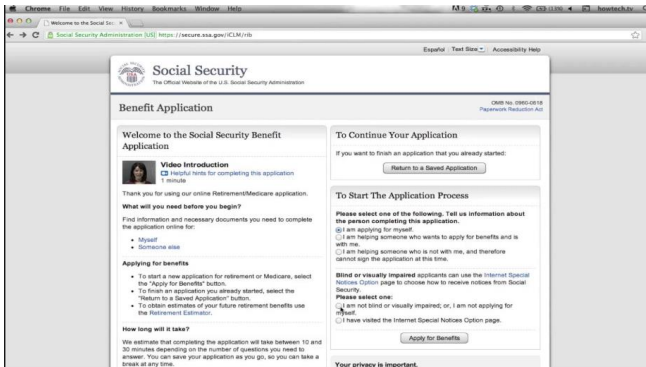
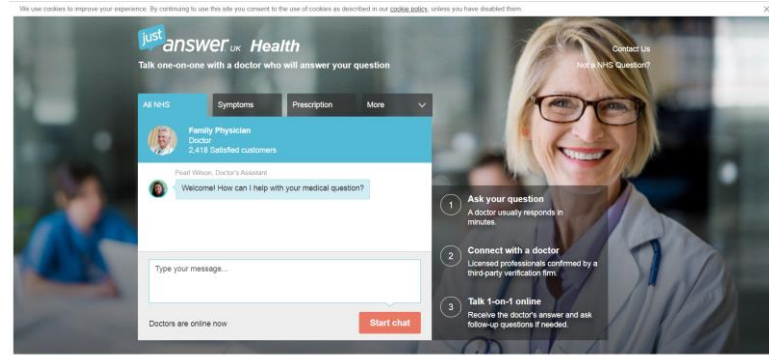
Lighthill report (1974) *'In no part of the field have the discoveries made so far produced the major impact that was then promised'*.



<http://www.startrek.com/article/first-mobile>



<http://anewdomain.net/jim-hendler-white-house-ai-report/>



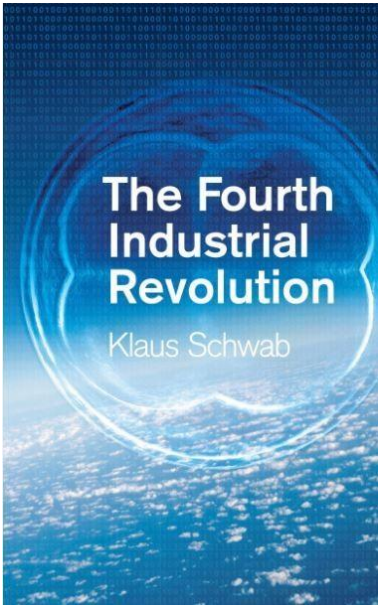
2018 *This Is What Happens In An Internet Minute*



Source:
<http://www.visualcapitalist.com/internet-minute-2018/>

Created By:
@LoriLewis
@OfficiallyChadd

2: Looking Inwards: knowing the social world

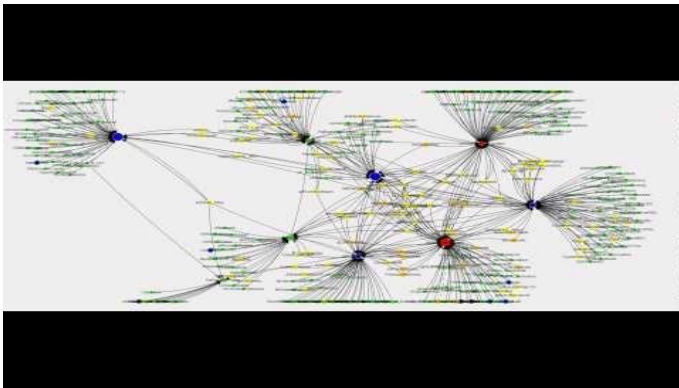


Ubiquitous, mobile supercomputing, big data, algorithmic decision making and intelligent robots are ‘fundamentally changing the way we live, work and relate to one another’

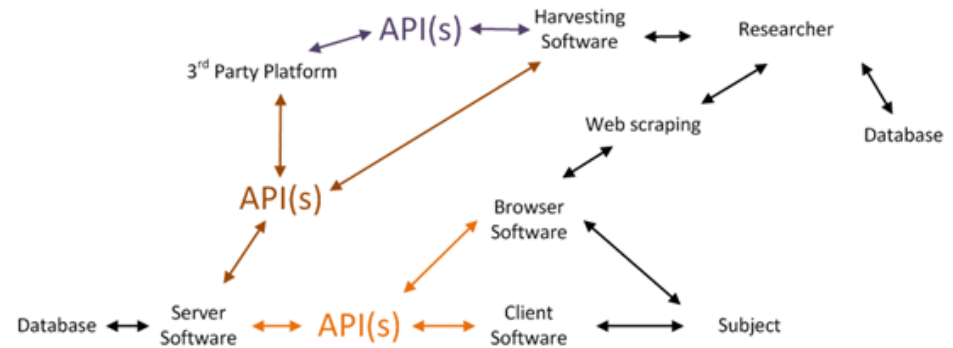
<https://www.weforum.org/about/the-fourth-industrial-revolution-by-klaus-schwab>

3.3 Epistemology and Methodology

- Newtonian gold standard (still): laws, prediction and objectivity
- Sociologists have long understood the *political strengths* of this epistemology & its *scientific weaknesses* for knowing the social world
- Deep commitment to epistemology and to methodological pluralism
- Challenging AND working with new forms of data



Tinati, Halford, Carr and Pope (2015)



Halford, Weal, Tinati, Carr and Pope 2018

3: Looking Outwards: making alliances

- Dynamism of sociology in response to social change
- Imports – growing the discipline
- Exports – growing other disciplines
- Alliances with computer science in the digital age
 - For sociology –taking the technical seriously
 - For computer science – taking the social seriously



Prof. Les Carr

.... there was no reason for CS to think about the social, it's all abstract data bases, small controlled environments, columns, spreadsheets and schema

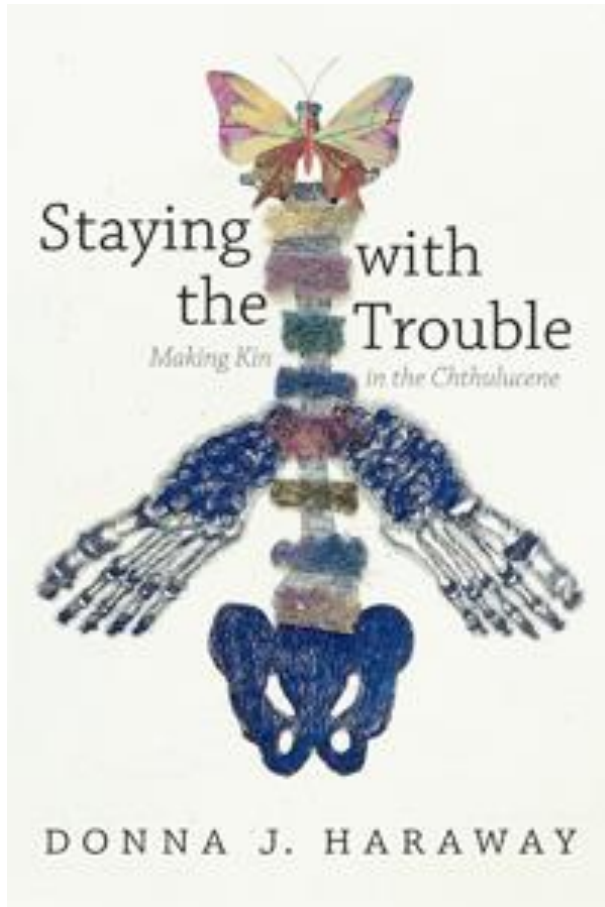
... all of a sudden you've got social media and the internet of things, and all of these things were outside our agreed black boxes ... for me, this is the social invading the machine but we still think in terms of very controlled schemas, we're not trained to see the social. What everyone is wrestling with now is not the technology, it's power. Computer Science has ever had its Heisenberg moment. This is happening now and Sociology is coming in to save the day.

How the Web is changing the World and the World is changing the Web

The Web Science Institute brings together world leading interdisciplinary expertise to tackle the most pressing global challenges facing the World Wide Web and wider society today. It is necessarily interdisciplinary, as much about social and organisational behaviour, as about the underpinning technology.



- Web Science Institute – Southampton
<https://www.southampton.ac.uk/wsi/index.page>
- Similarities and differences between sociological and computational thinking
- Different starting points and priorities
- Power of funding and academic hierarchy



'We require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations' (p.4).

We must move beyond both *'comic faith in technofixes'* (p.3) and the fatalism of a critique alone, where *'it's too late'* and *'there's no sense in trying to make anything any better'* (ibid) to focus on the *'the more serious and lively'* (p.4) task of making the future.

'The task is to become capable of response' (p.1)
– to be response-able in the digital age.

4: Looking Forwards: making futures

‘A common, liveable world must be composed bit by bit or not at all’ ...Whether we asked for it or not the pattern is in our hands’ (Haraway 2015; 40-43)

- Look forward to the *‘futures to which we direct our presents’* (Jasanoff and Kim 2015)
- Increased attention to ethical issues by tech companies and researchers
- ‘Ethical Legal and Social Implications’

Technology = Promise

Ethics = tick box

Sociologists = naysayers

- Beyond moral philosophy to consideration of the kind of society we want to live in – not *prediction* – attention to how the future is imagined, by whom, for whom, why this matters and how it might be otherwise

Artificial Intelligence

Will *'touch every corner of society'* (Intel) ... is *'one of the most important things that humanity is working on ... more profound than electricity or fire'* (Google) ... will *'solve the world's most pressing challenges'* (Microsoft) and *'has the potential to solve all of the most difficult problems of today and tomorrow'* (IBM)

How to get from here to there?

- **Who is this future for?** Individualised, un-contextualised, market driven, largely Western, focussing on problems e.g. traffic management, care of the elderly (autonomous vehicles)
- **Whose imaginary is this?** : *‘most such ideas come from a small group of elites who have been imagining and misunderstanding the interplay between technology and society since the 1950’s’ with ‘marvellous stories of wacky ideas drowning out social ideas and making it impossible to have proper conversations’* (Broussard 2018)
- **Why does it matter?** Because of the *‘mutual emergence in how one thinks the world is and what one determines it ought to be’* (Jasanoff 2015)

A sociological approach to AI futures

- Insists on placing technologies in wider networks – institutional, cultural, economic, political
 - Disrupts deterministic narratives
 - *‘forces us to think in concrete terms. Whereas political philosophy may begin from such abstract goods as justice, fairness, or equality, the sociological approach forces the question of how these are played out in practice, how they are built into the design of institutions and the actual processes of daily life’* (Levitas 2017; 7).

A sociological approach to AI futures

- Insists on placing technologies in wider networks – institutional, cultural, economic, political ...
- Brings people back in – not as users or consumers, or in terms of impact but as part of the world we are building – to open up possibilities for other futures that *‘people would sooner inhabit’* (Jasanoff and Kim, 2015). A critique of the present and democratisation of the future.
- Building different futures, beyond discourse, injunction *‘not just to imagine, to make the world otherwise’*:
 - Speculative design
 - AI for good
- Public sociology – what kind of society will enable us to prosper and thrive?

Conclusions

- Sociology is defined by our capacity to respond to social change – to renew itself – and we must draw on this to extend sociology for the digital age
- This means working and growing our theories, concepts and methods to make sociology relevant for the digital age – relevant to each other, and to the challenges of the digital age working with allies within and beyond the Academy - interpreting, re-presenting and integrating sociology as part of a wider response-ability to the digital age.

References

- Abrams, P. (1968)** *The Origins of British Sociology* Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Broussard, M. (2018)** *Artificial Unintelligence* Cambridge, MIT Press.
- Halford, S., Weal, M., Tinati, R., Carr, L. & Pope, C. (2017)** 'Understanding the production and circulation of social media data: Towards methodological principles and praxis' *New Media and Society* Online First at <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817748953>
- Haraway, D. (2016)** *Staying with the Trouble* Durham, Duke University Press.
- Jasanoff, S. and Kim, S-H. (2015)** *Dreamscapes of Modernity* Chicago, Chicago University Press.
- Levitas, R.** 'Where there is no vision, people perish' *Centre for Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity* <https://www.cusp.ac.uk/themes/m/m1-5/>
- Lighthill, J. (1974)** *Artificial Intelligence: a general survey*
<http://www.math.snu.ac.kr/~hicho/infomath/Articles/Lighthill%20Report.pdf>
- Tinati, R., Halford, S., Carr, L. & Pope, C. . (2014).** 'Big Data: Methodological Challenges and Approaches for Sociological Analysis' *Sociology* 48 (4), pp. 663-68.



Susan Halford

Professor of Sociology, Director Web Science Institute

@susanjhalford

Renewing Sociology in the Digital Age

#LSEBSA

Susan Halford

President, British Sociological Association, and Professor of Sociology and Director, Web Science Institute, University of Southampton

Chair: Mike Savage

Professor of Sociology and Director of the International Inequalities Institute, LSE

Hosted by the Department of Sociology

