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Big Data in Sociology: New Data, New Sociology?

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Abstract

Recently, we are witnessing an aspiration in the social sciences to collect and analyze the data about human behavior that is being produced with an unprecedented depth and scale. In this article, we discuss how this new data may impact sociology. Big Data has been defined in various ways in literature. Some of the latest works reveal that the key definitional boundary marker is not the volume of data produced, but the traits of velocity and exhaustivity. The differences of this new type of data are that it is not created for research purposes, that it covers the entire population, and that it is produced in real-time. There are two ways to answer the question of key changes in sociology in the era of Big Data. First, new online-data can greatly improve traditional sociological subfields which were prevented from being developed because of a lack of data. Now, there are new results based on online-data which shed light on the causal effect of social influence. Big data can also enable the development of new lines of research because of rapidly-developing computational techniques. This is especially important for those research areas which deal with large bodies of text, and most importantly, new techniques can greatly improve the sociology of culture where empirical research has been less developed when compared with theoretical ideas. Secondly, new data can have an impact on the disciplinary project of sociology. The article ends with the discussion of how Big Data can be used to support data-driven sociology, which differs from mainstream sociology where hypotheses are offered a priori, data is collected, and analyses are conducted to determine the degree to which the hypotheses are supported.

Keywords: big data, sociology, online data, social influence, causal effects, computational methods, text anal

Full text

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