

Convenors

Phill Brooker, Sheena McRae, Kate Orton-Johnson

2024 Events

We ran 2 main events this year:

A one-day joint event with the NCRM (National Centre for Research Methods) exploring generative AI and the future of social research. Details attached at the end of the report. The event was well attended and generated an excellent set of discussions.

These debates were carried forward into our second main activity this year which was a plenary event at the BSA conference in Manchester. A panel consisting of scholars for different career stages (Addie McGowan, Karen Gregory and Meenakshi Mani, chaired by Phill Brooker) discussed the provocation "Tracking AI Transformations: What generative AI means for social research now."

Plans for 2023

Themes emerged during the plenary which prompted discussion of future plans for the group. We hope to follow up on debates from the conference to try and reinvigorate the study group, engage new members and reimagine how we use our mailing list and study group activities. We also plan to refresh our public facing blurbs and develop a new engagement strategy.

Budget

As of 2024, the account balance for the Digital Sociology study group was £467.28 .

BSA/NCR event summary



NCRM AND BSA Digital Sociology Study Group One Day workshop on Generative AI and the Future of Social Research: Opportunities, Challenges, and Implications

1st October 2024 | 09:00 - 17:00

Radisson Blue, 80 High Street, The Royal Mile, Edinburgh, EH1 1TH

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Generative AI opens up novel avenues for research, enabling the creation and analysis of vast amounts of synthetic data, simulating and modelling complex social systems. Natural Language Processing techniques powered by generative AI provide us with powerful tools for the analysis of large volumes of data, facilitating the exploration of complex social phenomena and enabling researchers to identify trends and correlations not readily visible when using traditional methods.

However, these tools come with significant practical and ethical challenges. How can we ensure the reproducibility of data? How transparent are the algorithms used in AI-driven research, and how can we ensure researchers and participants understand the impact of these algorithms? How can we navigate the ethical complexities of working with AI-generated content? Given the well documented issues of bias in training datasets for Large Language Models how can we ensure that we represent and include diverse populations rather than perpetuating structural inequalities?

Concerns around the usefulness of the work produced by LLMs continues to be a notable issue, with the idea of LLMs as 'stochastic parrots' suggesting that while AI may produce plausible enough responses, these responses can be devoid of meaning.

In the realm of digital social research, generative AI poses fundamental questions about the nature of online content and its relationship to human agency. The rise of computational propaganda has already begun to test the assumed link between online content and human actors, but generative AI threatens to sever this connection entirely. As AI-generated content becomes increasingly pervasive, researchers must grapple with the epistemological implications of studying a digital landscape shaped by artificial intelligence.

Combined these issues pose concerns for what role AI can meaningfully play in sociological research. This event will bring together leading scholars and practitioners to discuss these issues and chart a path forward for social research in an era of generative AI. Through a series of panel discussions we will explore the methodological innovations, ethical challenges, and theoretical frameworks necessary to navigate this new frontier of social inquiry. Key questions will include:

- How might AI affect research design, sampling, data collection and analysis?
- What ethical challenges emerge when using AI in social research?
- What role do human researchers play in overseeing AI-driven processes?
- How can we ensure that AI-driven research is accessible and inclusive to researchers with varying levels of technical expertise and resources?
- What are the implications of AI on power dynamics within social research, and how can we mitigate potential biases and avoid reinforcing existing inequalities?
- What impact might AI have on research practices, disciplinary norms and understandings of knowledge production?
- How can we foster interdisciplinary collaborations between social scientists, computer scientists, ethicists, and other stakeholders to address the challenges and enrich the development and application of AI in social research?
- How might our research practices be configured to consider how we meet the emerging research agendas of our students as they move into their academic and industrial careers? How do we best equip them for the research questions they will address in years to come?

Join us as we confront the profound implications of generative AI for social research and work towards a future in which these powerful tools are harnessed for the advancement of knowledge and the betterment of society.

Outline of day

Registration and Morning Refreshments			
9:00 - 09:15	Welcome and Introduction to the Conference		
09.15 - 10.30	Panel session 1	CHAIR – Sheena MacRae What are the implications of AI for how we do social research? Critical reflections on how we integrate Generative AI in social research.	Phillip Booker Jen Ross Kate Miltner Peaks Krafft
10.30- 10.45	Break		
10.45- 12.00	Panel session 2	CHAIR – Huw Davies How can we ensure that AI-driven research is accessible and inclusive? How can we mitigate potential biases and avoid reinforcing existing inequalities?	Ayça Atabey Mark Wong Nabila Cruz
12.00- 13.00	Lunch		
13.00- 14:30	Panel session 3	CHAIR – Mark Carrigan How can we foster interdisciplinary collaborations to address the challenges of AI in social research? How do we need to configure research practices to meet emerging research agendas?	Louise Scott Judy Robertson Jane Wellens
14.30- 14.45	Break		
14.45- 16.00	Closing Round Table	CHAIR – Kate Orton-Johnson Reflections, questions, provocations and next steps?	Vassilis Galanos Karen Gregory Kevin Guyan