Book Review


The role of digital technologies in life and in work gives many pause for reflection. There is little doubt that we are often involved in ‘conversations’ we would not ordinarily have because of the ubiquity of email and instant messaging. These do, regrettably, create mental clutter. That said, ‘conversations’ with researchers with shared interests are now convenient across time zones and geographical space through a variety of platforms, ‘conversations’ and connections that were not easily facilitated 20 years ago. The ease of accessing resources such as ebooks via online libraries, through academic sites such as www.academia.edu, and the rise of peer reviewed electronic journals have made life easier for those working far from a campus library and create a larger readership for early-career researchers. But these are all tools for the researcher and academic for accessing resources. What of examining the web, using it as a subject to study? Is it possible to make sense of the digital world and the relationships it generates without a foundation in digital technologies?

To these ends, Robert Ackland’s compact text, *Web Social Science*, delivers. Subtitled *Concepts, Data and Tools for Social Scientists in the Digital Age*, Ackland has carefully written a guide for veteran and neophyte researcher with or without detailed knowledge of how to distinguish between a social network or an information network, or what is the difference between the static web and the semantic web. The aim in writing the book, the reader is told from the first sentence, is to ‘provide students, researchers, and practitioners with the theory and methods for understanding the web as a socially constructed phenomenon that both reflects social, economic, and political processes’ that also ‘impacts on these processes’ (p. xiii). Thus, it is not a plodding guide to what is ‘the web’, or what is a social network, for technophobes. However, before digging deeper into theory and methods, Ackland provides the readers with the primer necessary to make that journey.

This is accomplished in the Introduction which, briefly, provides a user-friendly lexicon of key terms, sets out the history and governance of the web, explores what is online computer-mediated interaction, and explains the nuances of cyberspace, virtual communities, and online social networks. Here, the writer also sets out the four core disciplinary approaches concerned with empirical research into...
the web: information science, media studies, and network science – that practiced by applied physicists and computer scientists, and that which falls under the domain of social scientists. Social science here, he makes clear, refers to the disciplines of sociology, political science, and economics. A sustained, vocal case is not made for an interdisciplinary approach; however, he does make it clear that disciplinary borders are not set in stone, and border-crossing is encouraged. A case for transdisciplinary co-operation or the sharing of methodologies becomes clear when Ackland sifts through the argument that permeates most debates about the web-based world: is it a ‘shaping force’ or a ‘social tool’?

Much of the research surrounding the web, he argues, has focused on how it ‘transforms behaviour’; the focus of his book is, instead, on how it is that the web allows people to ‘pursue their social, economic, and political ends’ (pp. 16–17). Ackland accomplishes this across the next two sections of the book. The first, ‘Web Social Science Methods’, is divided into three chapters detailing how online research methods, social media networks, and hyperlink networks serve as a means of gathering data. Examples as illustrations are provided and evaluated throughout, along with suggestions for further reading. The first chapter serves as an initiation for those who may be wary or feel out of their depth. Here, Ackland sets out to transfer from the ‘real’ world to the digital what are traditional social science research tools: surveys, interviews, and focus groups. The section on ‘Web Content Analysis’ covers the basics of both quantitative and qualitative analysis.

The researcher is then taken through the basics including sampling but is also walked through the more complex ethical and privacy considerations that remain critical even when some ‘virtual’ distance is evident. The emphasis across the text is on unobtrusive methods including the value of the analysis of hyperlink data. Content analysis of traces of social behaviours – those directed from one individual to another – is another example. These are particularly relevant to those wanting to break new ground because, as Ackler notes, such traces are available in large quantities in social media environments. Furthermore, this is significant because such data have been difficult to gather, measure, and analyse before the Internet entered social life. Now both can be subject to both qualitative and quantitative analysis when gathered from sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

This scaffold-style approach from the ‘real’ or offline world to the online research world is adopted in the chapter on ‘Social Media Networks’. Here, the researcher is taken on a journey through what are the traditional concepts of social networks and social network analysis. The lexicon and concepts as they have been employed, historically, by sociologists to make sense of networks are extended into social media realms such as Facebook, and information network realms such as Twitter. The distinction between the two is critical, particularly when making a study of what flows along ties, for what goal, and to what ends. A social network involves two-way communication, or the potential for two-way communication, and interdependence between actors (p. 74). However, an information network does not, typically, provoke two-way communication: the one-way transmission of information, typically broadcast to many actors, is its hallmark (p. 74).
Classifying the type of network, according to Ackland, is critical to deciding how it should be studied. He also details the value of studying social life in other forms of networks, including what the reader learns are affiliation networks such as Wikipedia.

The ‘hows’ are detailed in Part II, ‘Web Social Science Examples’. While the previous section provided many user-friendly methodological ‘how-tos’ within the context of explaining what are, and what is the potential of, the various methods, tools, and data available, Part II extends all by exploring the advances made in the field through a broad range studies conducted to date. Ackland continues with the user-friendly approach that, once again, points to why this text is a handy addition to the methods bookshelf of an early or late career researcher across social science disciplines. For quick reference, this section is organised into chapters that cover a range of research goals from ‘[Friendship, formation and social influence’, to ‘Politics and participation’ and, at the book’s close, ‘Commerce and marketing’.

The chapter on ‘Organisational Collective Behaviour’ is particularly valuable to those interested in the work of, say, NGOs, or to those of us who study the lives of groups and individuals who are, typically, silenced and pushed into the margins of society. The web and its networks have opened up platforms from microblogs on Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr to larger comprehensive websites worldwide for those who speak on behalf of waste pickers, migrant domestic workers, and others who count among the world’s urban poor. Considering the historical, grassroots-nature of collective action, Ackland contends that there are ‘ideological and organisational reasons’ why this is the medium of choice for disseminating messages outside of mainstream media outlets that may have, traditionally, turned a ‘deaf ear’ to these social actors.

A lot of attention has been given to a similar use of web-based media by protest movements such as the anti-government protests in Iran in 2009, and the Arab Spring in early 2011. Web Social Science was published in 2013, and Ackland is current in his consideration of the these events and, more importantly, the research conducted in their wake that explored whether the presence of social media increases the likelihood of participation in civil unrest, and how the presence of social media changes the dynamics of protest. This phenomenon is given space in the same chapter that address research on mainstream governance and public policy development demonstrating, perhaps unintentionally, how the web cannot be ignored as a vehicle for social and political change, and one that demands that researchers shelve the notion of behavioural change as its defining quality.

For those who take up that challenge, or any of the other holes in research about the web that are highlighted, Web Social Science serves as a first-stop or even a one-stop guide. The author successfully demystifies what is a jargon-heavy domain, while creating a text that encourages the student-researcher to draw analogies between the offline and online worlds, replicate established studies to deepen our understanding of power relations, and extend ‘traditional’ methods and concepts. It makes cross-disciplinary links clear to the sociologist in a way that, vicariously, makes the work of those who study society and power clear to researchers from
other disciplines. Not surprisingly, it is available in a variety of electronic formats. In short, *Web Social Science* serves as a solid social science methods handbook in its own right, and as a handy web-savvy addendum to methods texts across disciplines that are older. Older, that is, not obsolete.

**Susan Marie Martin**  
University College Cork, Cork, Ireland  
Email: susan.martin@umail.ucc.ie