Digital Methods in Africa and beyond – a view from Down Under

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In 2019 we both had the privilege of visiting South Africa as the guests of Rhodes University, who hosted the inaugural African Digital Methods Symposium. During our week there, we participated in and co-led workshops on specific digital methods, and learned from the other participants about their methodologies for studying everyday digital media and communication in a range of African contexts.

The opportunity to subsequently contribute some brief commentary to this Special Issue invites us to acknowledge the peculiarities of our subject positions as Australian scholars. Geographically, we are indisputably part of the South (the literal translation of 'Terra Australis' being 'southern land') – and if nothing else our shared vulnerability to climate change should promote a strong sense of solidarity; economically we are generally considered to be part of the 'Global North'.

As a nation, of course, Australia shares a colonial heritage with many African countries. Our Australian academic cultures have in common with South Africa (among others) a history of British colonisation, which inevitably brings with it the centring of certain knowledge practices and disciplinary structures, and the decentring of others. For example, we both trained in a Department of English in the 1990s, which was the host not only for English-language literary studies, but also for wide range of communication, media and culture-related subjects, despite Australia's increasingly multicultural reality.

While set against this backdrop of historical and ongoing colonialism, Indigenous research methodologies and knowledge practices are making significant contributions to Australian communication studies, perhaps most notably in our own field of digital and social media. First Nations people worldwide are especially avid and innovative social media users, as Bronwyn Carlson and Tanja Dreher note in what they state is the first special issue of a media and communication journal (*Media International Australia*) to be devoted to Indigenous social media research (Carlson & Dreher, 2018). The articles Carlson and Dreher curate demonstrate how much Indigenous knowledges have to offer the field, whether through considering the methodological implications of communication and knowledge practices like listening and yarning circles (Carlson & Frazer, 2018), or simply by amplifying the innovative forms of activism

that Indigenous cultural leaders (including popular culture leaders like musicians) are employing (Hutchings & Rodger, 2018). In Australia, scholars have particularly highlighted the work of IndigenousX (see https://indigenousx.com.au/), a cross-platform media, consultancy and training organisation that convenes Indigenous publics and promotes strong community through their innovative social media presence, including by rotating curatorship of the official @IndigenousX Twitter account (Sweet et al., 2013).
Despite its deep and contested historical dependencies on Britain, Australian digital media and communications scholarship more generally has a complex and ambivalent relationship to the Global North: Australian academia is primarily English-speaking and yet located at an extreme distance from the UK or the US; connected through travel and scholarly exchange to Europe, the UK, and North America's various linguistic and scholarly traditions, but not especially loyal to any one of them. We are also increasingly conscious of our own regionality, and are privileged to host and be hosted by, as well as to teach and be taught by, scholars and PhD students from East and Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China, and a number of African and South American countries.

The concept of 'digital methods' needs to be just as carefully situated. For many people, 'digital methods' connotes 'big data' subjected to computer-assisted statistical analysis and fancy network visualisation, often to the exclusion of qualitative or ethnographic work. But that is not what, or certainly not *all,* we mean by it, preferring an approach more aligned to earlier work by Richard Rogers and colleagues (2013), which entailed treating the digital not as a transparent window onto the social, but as a societal actor that needed to be critically studied using its own language and structures – which entails adopting 'the methods of the medium', in Rogers' words.

In discussing digital methods, we urge the avoidance of simplistic binary oppositions – whether between 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' methods, between 'data-driven' and 'ethnographic' methods, or between 'computational' and 'critical' methods. The power of digital methods within digital media and communication research lies in their hybridity: computational approaches can be critical; qualitative approaches can interrogate computation; and creative digital media methods (like digital storytelling) can be used as part of community-engaged, participatory projects. Such 'hybrid digital methods' (Burgess 2021) are vitally important for engaging with digital cultures and the platforms that mediate them in particular infrastructural, socio-economic, and political contexts. Two examples from our own work are the app walkthrough and the platform biography.

The app walkthrough (Light et al., 2018) is a 'close reading' method that enables researchers to perform the critical analysis of a given app. In addition to undertaking targeted background research into the app's operating model and expected uses, the method asks the researcher to systematically and forensically step through the various stages of app registration and entry, everyday use and discontinuation of use, exhaustively documenting the interface at each step using screenshots and field notes.

The platform biography (Burgess & Baym, 2020) builds on but expands beyond this close analysis approach, drawing together materials about key constitutive elements of platforms (their business models, their interfaces and features, and users' experiences of these) to tell the stories of how platforms and their cultures change over time – and in Burgess and Baym's (2020 book *Twitter – A Biography*, this approach is initially modelled through a study of Twitter's transformation from interpersonal message service to global news platform.

Both of these hybrid digital methods highlight the value of bringing together a critical, detailed working understanding of the computational layers of digital media platforms with a grounded, empirical and interpretivist understanding of such technologies' *cultures of use* – the collective and contested everyday practices and norms of individual users and collectives, in their highly particular local contexts.

Three of the articles in this special issue provide excellent case studies of these local particularities of digital culture, and in the use of 'hybrid digital methods' as part of the qualitative researcher's toolkit for studying them. Indra de Lanerolle, Alette Schoon, and Marion Walton describe and reflect on their innovative 'mobile diary method', which builds on older traditions (such as the 'media diary' and media practice theory) in media and communications research, adapted for digital technologies in specific local contexts. The studies that the article reports on all focus on the mobile phone – a personal digital communications technology, but one that is deeply entangled with social relations and technical infrastructures across work, family, and leisure. Accordingly, the mobile diary approach enables a thicker description of digital inclusion and exclusion issues in these contexts, because it enables the materiality, infrastructures, and political economy to be brought into the picture, while keeping the participants' immediate, everyday experiences at the heart of the story.

In the second article that uses hybrid digital methods, Claire Moran and Brady Robards reflect on their use of digital ethnography, including their well-known 'scroll-back interviewing' methodology, in researching the digital connectedness of African young people in Australia. They demonstrate both the value and challenges of combining 'born-digital' methods with more traditional qualitative social research techniques, such as the in-depth interview. In addition to the rich insights produced, the article reflects productively on issues such as participant privacy, and the sometimes productive, sometimes uncomfortable blurred boundaries between the formal space of the interview and the informal space of friendship, especially where researchers are engaging in 'deep hanging out' in social media. As the authors suggest, the article produces an extremely suggestive 'road map' for future projects seeking to understand the role of digital media practices in the complex lives of young people.

A good example of the use of digital media in participatory research is described in Anthony Ambala's contribution to this special issue. The article reflects on a project that undertook digital storytelling activities with the Abakuria people of Kenya, with the aim of amplifying their voices in the public sphere and with the added benefit of enhancing digital media literacy. As the article briefly explains, this particular approach to digital storytelling, taught in community

workshops, was first established in the US in the 1990s, but spread widely in the mid-2000s as digital production technologies became far more affordable and accessible, as the approach was taken up by the BBC via Daniel Meadows and his 'Capture Wales' program, and as the techniques were passed on in 'train-the-trainer' workshops around the world (see Burgess, 2006; Hartley & McWilliam, 2009). The approach as described in the present article represents a unique contribution to a shared stock of methodology – taking it forward in particular through considerations of audience and language community as important narrative choices made by participants (more often, such projects focus primarily on production, placing less emphasis on distribution, audience or reception). This case study, added to the global archive of digital stories and research-based reflections on them, adds to the potential for inter-cultural comparative and evaluative work on such digital storytelling projects that is perhaps yet to be realised.

While we have argued for the importance of hybrid, qualitative digital methods, at the same time larger-scale, data-driven approaches remain tremendously useful in observing and diagnosing patterns in public communication – especially where they are used in combination with in-depth, forensic analysis. This large-scale observational work is critical as it can provide the broader context against which smaller and deeper studies can be evaluated: are the practices and patterns observed amongst a specific community of users repeated across an entire platform? Do the issues and topics promoted by a small group of highly vocal activists find resonance with the general public? Asking such questions enables us to move beyond what we have described elsewhere as the 'low-hanging fruit' in social media analytics (Burgess & Bruns, 2015: 107) – rather than merely observing that a political hashtag on Twitter is trending, for example, we are able to assess whether this attention is greater than we would expect for other hashtags of the same type, and whether it comes merely from the usual suspects or also from users who are not normally attentive to political debates.

Similarly, large-scale, data-driven studies have the potential to uncover patterns of media use and participation that were not already obvious and anticipated. Taking its cue in part from similar approaches the natural sciences, such explorative and open-ended research takes an explicitly abductive – rather than deductive or inductive – approach (Dixon, 2012) that observes patterns in the data and over the course of several iterations formulates, tests, and refines the hypotheses that may explain them. This methodological framework has enabled us, for instance, to draw attention to the 'hidden' practice of phatic sharing in the Australian Twittersphere (Bruns & Moon, 2019): a day-to-day practice of hanging out and managing social ties that, once all the known and obvious publics formed around specific topics and hashtags are accounted for, turns out to represent a considerable proportion of everyday Twitter activity. Many more such under-recognised practices may be lurking beneath the surface of Twitter and other social media platforms, obscured by the trending hashtags and savvy influencers that seek to draw our attention.

But the particular characteristics of national media systems, political settings, and everyday contexts of use are essential to any useful interpretation of these patterns – and a detailed understanding of these specific contexts is often best generated through close, ethnographic

work. Marenet Jordaan's contribution to this special issue engages directly with the important role that ethnography has played in journalism studies, in particular focusing on newsroom ethnography, and reflecting in particular on their own recent study of Netwerk4, a niche, digital-first Afrikaans publication. Jordaan makes a compelling case for the value of ongoing ('perpetual') ethnography as a way to observe and identify the significance of digital transformation of journalism – including both continuity and change.

An exploratory and open-minded philosophy is generally advisable also as methods, approaches, and concepts from Global North research frameworks are applied to the study of African media and social media. As the article by Dani Madrid-Morales in this issue points out, African countries continue to be severely underrepresented in many key data sources used in contemporary media and communications research – from Factiva to Lexis Nexis and beyond. Similarly, he notes, 'computational methods have yet to be adopted in the study of African digital news content' – for example, the reliability of computational content analysis tools is limited even when analysing English-language texts from African countries if such tools have been trained predominantly by using corpora that represent speech patterns from the US and UK, and worse still for content in indigenous African languages. Further, general assumptions about how digital and social media may be used must also be checked against specific local contexts, where economic, technological, and cultural factors may result in practices that differ very considerably from those observed in the hegemonic cultures of the Global North. And finally, the methods and approaches for such research that North American, European, and, yes, Australian scholars are now readily applying in their own work may also remain inaccessible to their African colleagues because of the substantial cost of some of the data sources, software tools, and computing infrastructure required.

Turning this disadvantage into an opportunity, Madrid-Morales therefore argues for a more proudly independent and innovative approach to African digital media studies, and sketches out a roadmap towards this goal by tackling the challenge of evolving news media research on the continent beyond its prevalent focus on newspaper content. The roadmap draws on the best in readily accessible, state-of-the-art open source toolkits and public data sources, and presents a variety of opportunities for research groups that wish to implement, adapt, and extend it in their own work. The sketch presented here can only be a start, of course, and similar roadmaps are required for other areas of study beyond the narrow field of digital news, but we are hopeful that this index of possibilities, the African Digital Methods Symposium that prompted it (and this entire special issue), and any future events and initiatives like them will continue to encourage this work of innovation, adaptation, and dissemination.

Rich with examples of hybrid digital methods applied to and emerging from African contexts, the articles in the special issue open up fruitful lines of enquiry and multiple potential new connections and conversations with scholars elsewhere. But what comes through most clearly in these articles is the fact that, in their platforms, practices, politics, economics, textual and visual languages, and cultures of use, African digital media are as distinctive and diverse as the continent itself, and they cannot be understood simply by applying generic conceptual and methodological frameworks from hegemonic scholarly contexts.

Only research that is led by scholars with deep contextual knowledge of the patterns and phenomena they observe can meaningfully describe and account for contemporary African digital media practices. In doing so, it will in turn also generate many new conceptual and methodological impulses for global digital media scholarship – because here, too, context matters, and is all too often ignored in the mechanistic application of established methods and tools. We have much to learn from each other – and this special issue is only the start.

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