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Noortje Marres. *Digital Sociology: the re-invention of social research.* Cambridge UK: Polity Press. 2016. £16.99 pbk. ISBN: 78-0-7456-8478-9. 240pp.

Review by Helen Kennedy, University of Sheffield

In *Digital Sociology: the re-invention of social research*, Noortje Marres outlines an intellectual agenda for the field, drawing on sociological traditions but also entering into dialogue with related disciplines like media and communication studies and computer science. Marres seeks to move definitions of digital social research beyond the simple analysis of behavioural data, towards an engagement with the wider changes in relations between knowledge, technology and society that we are witnessing as the digital becomes a 'total social fact' (Fish et al 2013, referenced p13). It is this total social fact that makes understanding the role that digital sociology can play so important.

The first chapter of the book, **'What is digital sociology',** does definitional work. Whereas the 'digital' in digital sociology often refers to a) its objects of enquiry; b) its methods; and c) its platforms, not surprisingly, Marres moves us beyond these simple definitions. An important feature of digital society is interactivity, understood by Marres as the mutually constitutive relationship between knowledge, technology and society. Digital sociology must *make something of*, not shy away from, the constitutive role of the digital not just in social life, but also in social research, she writes.

Marres moves on in the next chapter to consider what is social about digital technologies, and she proposes an answer to this question which also focuses on interactions between social life and digital media technologies, specifically the ways in which digital infrastructures shape the social. However, rather than seeing this as a problem to be ironed out before social research can proceed, she sees it as an opportunity to experiment with methods and with objects, as practices enabled by digital platforms open up the possibility of experimenting with our understandings of sociality and the methods we use to research it. Sociology can also act on and constitute social behaviour (classifying people in certain ways leads them to act accordingly, for example) and this three-way, interactive relationship between sociological knowledge, technology and society also opens up experimental possibilities for digital sociology.

The third and fourth chapters address epistemological and methodological questions. Here Marres advocates for what she calls 'interface methods' (or treating methods as interfaces), which acknowledge that social research methods are both built into digital infrastructures but also configurable within them. That digital methods are not made to perform as sociological machines should inspire us to experiment with reconfiguring them so that they can serve the purposes of social research. Digital infrastructures influence what it is possible to research and platform affordances limit social media analysis as much as they limit social media activity, but we should work with and research this fact, deploying it affirmatively as 'a constitutive aspect of the enactment of social life by digital means' (p124). Marres argues that digital sociology should test 'the *partly unknown* methodological capacities of digital infrastructures, devices and practices to inform and advance social research' (102). We need to embrace the instability of platforms, she proposes.

In the fifth chapter, **Who are digital sociology's publics?**, a question that has been troubling me in the rest of the book comes fully into view: why focus on digital sociology? Should it not be digital society that is our primary focus, a transdisciplinary phenomenon? For example, because of the participatory (and Marres uses this term in a much broader sense than is usually meant) features

of digital infrastructures, Marres proposes that digital sociology might offer a way of 'knowing society with society'. Here there is some confusion about my and Giles Moss's concept of the 'knowing publics' which might emerge through the mechanisms of digital social research, as she understands 'knowing' here as a verb (private corporations knowing publics) whereas we mean it as an adjective (publics who are knowledgeable about themselves). This is important because, in fact, Moss and I propose *more* than 'knowing society with society' – rather, we refer to the potential for societies to know themselves. Whereas Marres asks: *Can we know society in more responsive ways*? (p164), I think there is a more important question: can these apparatuses be mobilised for societies to know themselves? Her focus on digital *sociology* means that questions about what *societies* can do (not what sociology can do) in the face of the apparatuses of digital participation and digital ways of knowing disappear from view. Likewise, her typology of digital forms of knowing society could go one step further and include genuinely co-creational experiments in digital forms of societies knowing themselves (such as the work of Catherine D'Ignazio (http://www.kanarinka.com/), or the Our Data Ourselves project (http://gtr.rcuk.ac.uk/projects?ref=AH%2FL007770%2F1), to name only two of many examples).

In the final chapter, Marres proposes that the issues raised by digital ways of knowing and intervening in society are framed too narrowly, focusing as they do on ethical, legal and social issues and, in her view, sidelining methodological and epistemological questions. This is an odd opposition, as most researchers in this domain would agree that they all matter. Nonetheless, the book ends on matters with which I entirely agree. As she has argued with Weltevrede (2015) and reiterates here, what is important in digital social research is that we do not aim to quickly resolve or contain whatever we see to be the problems that it ushers forth. Rather, we need to 'render these problems researchable qua problems' (p186). Indeed, researchers have a responsibility to do this, as these are problems not just of digital social research, but also of digital social life.