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DIGITAL SOCIETY, INTERACTION ORDER AND AUTOMATION

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

We dedicate this book to the late Janice Lamar Williams.

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INTRODUCTION

Sociology has made significant strides in relation to the conceptualisation and empirical study of digital societies. The move from a primary focus on new forms of digital data has expanded, developed and reconnected with a wider consideration of social and technological change. The rapid development and social impact of social media continue to be felt, now accompanied by new disruptive digital technologies, such as generative artificial intelligence (AI), that have the potential to intensify and accelerate the goods, bads and unintended consequences associated with social media's impact, while generating new avenues into existing social domains and forms of life in ways that will likely transform some of their routine features in predictable but also novel ways. Furthermore, some of the popular forecasts for how the next wave of disruptive digital technologies will, allegedly, transform social life increasingly invite healthy sociological scepticism as our understanding of 'hype cycles' and promotional 'visioneering' is comprehended as part and parcel of a social–technical landscape characterised by competing commercial cultures, marketing and ideological ambitions that are expressed through proactionary 'world making' narratives. Yet, within this context, there remains ample opportunity to inform wider public discourse concerning digital transformation through both theoretical and empirical means.

This book contributes to sociological approaches to understanding the social implications of new technologies and the reordering of relations that are being driven by significant socio-technical transformation and more specifically, socio-digital change. The sociological study of socio-digital change draws on a range of perspectives and approaches. It includes the study of technological development, the social life of data and algorithms, surveillance and regulation, digital cultures and identities, socio-technical inequalities, and the political economy of data infrastructures and environmental impacts. It

also involves exploring the way in which the emerging contours of digital society impact key domains of social life. In sociological and conceptual terms, this has been reflected through the remastering of classic questions and concerns, reconsideration of methods and data, debates concerning sociology as a disciplinary enterprise and consideration of new socio-digital domains as sites for theorisation and empirical inquiry (Housley et al., 2022). In the opening sections of this introduction, we will unpack these questions in turn.

The remastering of classic questions revolves around the ways in which questions of social organisation, social change and the place and configuration of individuals and social systems continue to sustain the way in which sociological phenomena are empirically interrogated and theorised. These classic questions were summarised by C. Wright Mills in *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) in the following manner:

(1) What is the structure of this particular society as a whole? What are its essential components… how does it differ from other varieties of social order…?

(2) Where does this society stand in human history? What are the mechanics by which it's changing?…

(3) What varieties of men and women now prevail in this society and in this period, and what varieties are coming to prevail? (1959, p. 13).

Of relevance to our concerns are the ways in which the three classic questions provide a powerful set of heuristics through which to interrogate features associated with digital societies. For example, the ways in which platform economy and culture can be understood to increasingly shape and organise routine social communication and everyday encounters, or how algorithmic organisation and the network society are driving both social and technical change. Finally, the blurring of boundaries between offline and online worlds is influencing social character and identity in multiple ways.

The reconsideration of methodological approaches has centred around some of the affordances and opportunities that social media data present to public sociology and social science (Housley et al., 2014). The explosion of relatively easy-to-access social media Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) during the 2010s enabled sociology and social science more generally to respond and navigate the conditions that were diagnosed by the empirical crisis argument advanced in the 2000s (Savage & Burrows, 2007, 2009). This crisis, it was argued, had been brought about by the emergence of large volumes of commercial data that were being generated by the advent of store

cards that could track human behaviour in detail and across large groups of consumers, internet search data and other emerging digital data streams. The disparity between commercial digital data and public social science was stark and was understood to have implications for the status of public social science and the scope of its claims and viability.

This 'empirical crisis' led to methodological debates concerning the extent to which new forms of 'social media analysis' could act as (1) a surrogate for conventional research methods (e.g. in attempts to capture the views and attitudes of 'hard to reach' groups), (2) a means of augmenting conventional research methods through data linkage or mixed methods approaches or (3) represent a reorientation of both data and methods in relation to new social phenomena and populations (see Edwards et al., 2013). In terms of social media as a data source, more recent developments and increased commercial pressures have led to a situation where open API points (interfaces for the automated extraction of data and information in near real time) have become expensive and closed to academic social scientists in a significant shift that has been described as the 'API apocalypse' (Bruns, 2022).

These opportunities and challenges have led some to promote a move to reorientate sociology and the social sciences more generally towards approaching new forms of data with advanced computational-led 'social data science' techniques on the one hand or new forms of theorising, inclusive of a careful consideration of the social life of methods and techniques for data analysis (Ruppert et al., 2013), on the other. Discussions of disciplinary reorientation in the digital age have also reproduced perennial debates concerning innovation and conceptual amnesia within the social sciences (Atkinson & Housley, 2003; Housley & Smith, 2017). In this book, we are advancing a key concept and empirical thread within sociology and the social sciences, namely the study of the interaction order, that has often been overlooked within these debates concerning reorientation, while emphasising how it now represents a key site for transformation, stake and interest by commercial and socio-technical forces.

Finally, the reconsideration of social domains in the context of socio-digital transformation enables theoretical and empirical consideration of the ways in which this is impacting and shaping topics of study and potential sites for inquiry. These key domains of social life include health, public space, education, work, bureaucracy, and the domestic sphere. They loosely correspond with ideas of institutional order put forward across different social theories but they also correspond with the social sciences' division of labour and expertise. While the changes we explore in this book might also have an impact on the organisation of social domains, following

them provides us with a lens for tracing socio-digital transformations in vastly different, yet interrelated, areas. In terms of the argument and focus advanced in this book, and as stated previously:

> *Some wider consideration of interactionist and aligned sociologies' approach to exploring and understanding the emerging contours of digital society is long overdue. The transformation of the interaction order and the need to understand how social actors engage with each other and automated agents in and through digital societies is a key features of contemporary societies. (Housley, 2021, p. 6)*

This book resonates with these concerns. It focuses on a specific and key consideration for those who study digital society and, at the same time, it's active participants and members. Our focus is on the relationship between interaction order, socio-technical transformation and socio-digital change and the insertion and unintended consequences of automation into the social grammar of interaction. Furthermore, we locate our approach within a set of aligned forms of sociological inquiry, namely interactionist sociology, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, that examine the interaction order in aligned but also sometimes distinct ways.

Consequently, in the following chapters, we will aim to unpack and connect with wider developments. Our focus will be on the ways in which the proliferation and advancement of disruptive digital technologies are shaping (and attempting to shape) the 'interaction order'. As outlined in Chapter 3, the interaction order remains a key idea in sociology. It refers to the ubiquitous and contingent dimensions of social life and organisation as an active accomplishment that is produced through concerted human action and agency, albeit within bounded social, economic, technological and historical conditions.

In more concrete terms, the approach adopted in this book draws upon interactionist sociology (Atkinson & Housley, 2003), the work of Goffman (1983), ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1964; Lynch & Sharrock, 2010), contemporary conversation analysis (Stokoe, 2018) and membership categorisation analysis (Hester & Eglin, 1997; Housley & Dahl, 2024; Housley & Fitzgerald, 2015). This represents an aligned set of ideas characterised by important points of connection and difference.

In general terms and for the purpose of introduction, these aligned but distinct approaches all alert us to the ways in which social and societal realities can be understood and studied through members' interactional work.

This is clearly articulated in the work of Erving Goffman, whose detailed elaboration and analysis of the concept of the situation, the interaction rituals that maintain it, and the presentation of the self within it, provide an ethnographic and theoretical conceptualisation of the interaction order that informs some of our discussion. Furthermore, wider interactionist ideas concerning language and interaction are also drawn upon.

Ethnomethodology (EM) as an approach was developed by Harold Garfinkel (1967, 2002) and highlights the ways in which social organisation is locally accomplished through practical action and members' every day, accountable and reflexive use of 'ethnomethods'. Garfinkel (1967, p. vii) states:

> *In doing sociology, lay and professional, every reference to the 'real world', even where the reference is to physical or biological events, is a reference to the organised activities of everyday life. Thereby, in contrast to certain versions of Durkheim that teach that the objective reality of social facts is sociology's fundamental principle, the lesson is taken instead, and used as a study policy, that the objective reality of social facts* as *an ongoing accomplishment of the concerted activities of daily life, with the ordinary, artful ways of that accomplishment being by members, used, and taken for granted, is, for members doing sociology, a fundamental phenomenon.*

This study policy has generated a significant corpus of studies that have focused on the empirical examination of practical action as a fundamental phenomenon and in ways that have generated significant insight into how social organisation is routinely built, sustained, indexically navigated and accountably oriented to as a reflexive accomplishment. Ethnomethodology has given rise to a range of approaches to the study of interaction in situ that we draw on throughout this book.

Conversation Analysis (CA) is an approach founded by Harvey Sacks (1992) that studies the ways in which talk, conversation, and other activities are organised sequentially by members through a myriad of conversational practices and methods. Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson's (1974) groundbreaking paper has been followed by a significant empirical programme and the emergence of a global research movement (Stokoe, 2018). With the machinery by which members organise turn-taking in conversation as its starting point, conversation analysis and its detailed examination of the sequential and sequence organisation of talk and interaction inform our analyses throughout. For example, concepts such as adjacency pairs, forms of

repair or prefacing practices are drawn upon in our analysis of illustrative data materials.

Finally, Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA) is an ethnomethodological approach that also has its roots in the work of Harvey Sacks but has been developed into an approach to the study of talk and interaction by Stephen Hester and colleagues (Hester & Eglin, 1997). It continues to be developed for the analysis of different kinds of data and phenomena (Fitzgerald & Housley, 2015; Housley & Fitzgerald, 2002; Housley et al., 2026) that are complementary to the sequential focus of conversation analysis but also consider the ways in which knowledge and culture are accomplished in action. Of primary importance is the examination of the ways that members deploy categories and their analysis in the accomplishment and co-ordination of everyday interaction and communication.

We aim to present their relevance as parallel resources through which to reconsider the ontological and empirical realities of the interaction order in the context of the digital revolution. In doing so, we will also seek to consider some illustrative empirical examples, especially during the course of Chapters 4 and 5. These will take the form of short analyses that are provided as a means of grounding some of our arguments and observations. In some cases, these analyses are derived from more detailed and technical accounts published elsewhere; although the sociological and theoretical arguments pursued during the course of this book enrol them in novel ways. For the purposes of this book these analyses will primarily draw on interactionist approaches towards the study of accounts (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975; Housley & Fitzgerald, 2008; Scott & Lyman, 1968) membership categorisation analysis (Hester & Eglin, 1997; Housley & Fitzgerald, 2002, 2015) and ethnomethodologically informed conversation analysis (Stokoe, 2018). Furthermore, we drive and build these analyses, derived from both our previous and current work on the study of the emerging contours of digital society, from an ethnomethodological and interactionist set of sometimes intertwined but also distinct perspectives. In this way we aim to move beyond the 'narcissism of small differences' (Silverman, 1998) while recognising creative conceptual connections and tensions.

In Chapter 2, *Automation and the Emerging Contours of Digital Society*, we consider the idea of automation through a broad sociological lens. The chapter examines the ways in which some aspects of the sociological tradition have approached and explored this process. The idea of automation is explored as a subject matter of sociological work, where it is concerned with social theory and the theory of society, and as a matter of methods and introspection, where discussions around the social life of data and automation in digital societies and crises and opportunities associated with it are

discussed as a matter for sociology itself. We then explore the idea of automation in select key domains, including domestic life, public and urban spaces, workplaces, healthcare and wellbeing, education, and bureaucratic institutions, in which sociological research has identified related phenomena of digitalisation, datafication, algorithmic architectures and platformisation as features of ongoing processes of automation. Furthermore, we reflect on how this informs current debates surrounding the emerging contours of digital society and in relation to key domains of social life. In many respects, this chapter provides an illustrative overview of the emerging contours of digital society in terms of convenient domains for social life; in the sense that they remain clearly defined and understood spheres of activity and organisation associated with high modernity. This is important as it provides a way to think about socio-digital change and wider society before pivoting towards a series of conceptual moves and empirical illustrations that seek to shed light on the importance of the interaction order and its digital transformation as a ubiquitous and relevant consideration across these domains in networked times. In the concluding section of the chapter, we begin to consider the emergence of new endogenous domains that arise from digital technologies and automation such as influencers and content creators as a way of leading into the relevance of interactionist concepts such as the 'Self' for understanding automation in contemporary societies.

In Chapter 3, *The Generative Contours of the Interaction Order in the Digital Age*, we delve into interactionist concepts more systematically and develop our arguments concerning the importance of the interaction order, as a key site for understanding the social implications and constitution of disruptive digital technologies and the emergence of new socio-technical systems. An important consideration involves reflecting on the aligned but also distinct sociological ideas that have contributed to the formulation of the concept of the interaction order and its application to a set of coherent and interconnected social phenomena. We discuss the key ways in which the interaction order has been disrupted, punctuated and augmented across different settings and through a range of technologies, including body proxemic technologies, platforms, and logistic infrastructures. We engage with a range of sociological concepts and consider the extent to which we can detect a transformations in interaction order(s) as routine interaction becomes influenced and augmented through body proxemic technologies, smart mobile telephony, social media, generative AI and Large Language Models (LLMs). We do so as sociologists, but we also explore the analyses and efforts of other interested parties involved in the work of shaping the emerging contours of digital society, including developers and entrepreneurs, as well as 'lay' people

as everyday analysts of interaction order and technologically induced transformations. We discuss how, for developers and entrepreneurs, the interaction order has been a prime site for the extraction of data for generating value and for refining digital technologies and products. It is also a resource for building platform architectures that model and augment interaction at a globally networked scale. We draw on mundane accounts from public social media commentary to explore how disruption, augmentation and punctuation find resonance in how 'lay' people encounter, experience, make sense of, and comment on these socio-technical transformations that we might describe as interaction order 2.0 (and counting).

In Chapter 4, *The Commentator Machine*[1] *and the Digital Street*, we explore illustrative examples that are drawn from next-generation social media platforms that are actively enrolled in situated broadcasting and the presentation work of tech entrepreneurs. First, we can relate this to examples of mundane civics and situated broadcast (Housley, 2021) as a way of thinking about some of the contexts in which enhanced and augmented forms of interaction order can be heard and seen to take place. We consider some of the features of illustrative empirical examples and relate them to the way certain forms of street-level politics and contestation are being enacted within a transformed socio-technical environment. We also note how these developments might form a connection between the reconstitution of interactional parameters and the provision of data-generative contexts that provide the grounds for potential succession by more intense forms of hybridised human–machine interaction, such as agentic AI that is being materialised and virtualised through increasingly sophisticated chatbots and voice-enabled and visually performative 'digital personae'. We then turn to the live demonstration of a technology designed to produce such 'digital personae' in the entrepreneurial context of Big Tech's release and revelation presentations. By turning to the presentational practices of the live demonstration of 'synthetic personae' technology on stage, we explore the interactional accommodation of LLM powered voice technologies and get a sense of the forms that recipient design for chatbots and their limitations might take in the likely scenario of the implementation of chatbot interfaces in different settings. This interactional accommodation is part of the work of making a digital persona speak in role or identity-relevant ways to demonstrate the utility of this technology for a specified occupational group, namely content creators. This utility is presented by drawing on influencers and content creators as an occupational group with specifiable work problems that arise from platform-endogenous forms of augmented and broadcast interaction.