

University of Edinburgh launches the Digital Social Science Cluster to support social science research in times of the pandemic, write cluster leads Karen Gregory, Morgan Currie and Kate Miltner

The COVID-19 pandemic is increasing our reliance on the use of technology and digital platforms for education and research. From September, universities across Scotland will begin a phased approach to incorporate a combination of digital and in-person learning, also known as Hybrid Delivery. To strengthen support for social science research in digital contexts, University of Edinburgh's Centre for Data, Culture and Society (CDCS) has launched a new research cluster focusing on Digital Social Science.

Research around the world is pivoting toward the digital in response to some of the constraints emerging from COVID-19, and the cluster's current focus is on helping researchers navigate this change. For researchers who are unfamiliar with "digital social science" and "digital methods", it may seem like an entirely new – and intimidating – realm. It's true that digital environments offer novel types of data, and sometimes at quite a different scale. However, the basic tenets of sound research practices remain the same in digital spaces as they do in non-digital spaces. There is a lot of overlap between "digital" methods and more traditional

methods. For example, online interviews, digital ethnographies and internet-based surveys rely on many of the same methodological practices and concepts as their analog counterparts. There are also a range of newer methods that allow for the exploration of digital formats.

The digital social science cluster examines the affordances and limitations of new digital methods, research ethics, data access issues, problems related to corporate relationships, and the design and use of new tools. By sharing examples of projects that illustrate the uses and challenges posed by digital methods, we highlight the wide range of tools, methodologies and techniques that are used in digital social science research. The cluster also draws on experiences from previous and ongoing research projects to identify challenges and raise questions connected to different methods, whether that is community mapping, survey research, interviews, or geo-tracking. As a “methods lab” we aim to make methods, tools, datasets, and projects accessible to students and staff.

As the Cluster evolves, we plan on hosting a speaker series featuring field-leading researchers from around the world. We also hope to host digital and in-person workshops in order to provide a better understanding on everything that goes into digital social science. We will collaborate whenever possible with other CDCS clusters on these activities.

If you are interested in giving a talk or getting involved with the Digital Social Science cluster, please reach out to any of the co-directors.

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