It’s a trap!

Three current pitfalls for the ‘softer’ side of computational SSH

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TOMMASO VENTURINI & ANDERS KRISTIAN MUNK
CONTROVERSY MAPPING
A FIELD GUIDE
2.2 Issue map cropped from the pages of the National Flood Forum using IssueCrawler (02.02.2008). Top 50 nodes displayed.

**2007**

**2017**
“You need to get your fingers stuck in the minced meat if you are going to make meatballs”
I have (at least) three problems...

...that I keep bumping up against when I try to get my hands dirty with the digital minced meat...

...namely our tendencies to self-evidently equate...

1. ...computational methods with quantitativist ambitions
2. ...critique of computational practices with safe distance from those practices
3. ...SSH uptake of computational methods with user-friendliness and support
Stop equating computational methods with quantitativist ambitions
Computational methods ≠ quantitativist ambitions

Long humanistic tradition for data intensive research practices where the aim has not been to explain or predict, but to describe, explore, and pose better questions. E.g. the historical geographical paradigm in ethnoogy.

Computational methods ≠ quantitativist ambitions

In order to be useful in SSH research, many datafication processes require qualitative curation, which in turn requires in-depth understanding of specific digital settings.

Computational methods ≠ quantitativist ambitions

Much of the data that is increasingly becoming ‘computable’ is essentially qualitative material, which can retain its richness and remain the subject of qualitative questions.

Computational methods ≠ quantitativist ambitions

You might even argue that the current generation of machine learning algorithms, with all their explainability challenges, resemble more to qualitative than to conventional quantitative modes of reasoning.
Computational methods ≠ quantitativist ambitions

But there are deep-seated historical reasons why many predominantly qualitative SSH disciplines, such as anthropology, tend to associate computational methods squarely with formalist/positivist/nomothetic rather than interpretative/hermeneutic/idiographic approaches.

“[Ethnoscience] holds that culture is composed of psychological structures by means of which individuals or groups of individuals guide their behavior. (...) And from this view of what culture is follows a view, equally assured, of what describing it is--the writing out of systematic rules, an ethnographic algorithm, which, if followed, would make it possible so to operate, to pass (physical appearance aside) for a native.” (Geertz, 1973:11)
TO FORM A COMPLETE PICTURE, BOTH BIG AND THICK DATA ARE CRITICAL BECAUSE THEY PRODUCE DIFFERENT TYPES OF INSIGHTS AT VARYING SCALES AND DEPTHS.

Stop equating critique of computational practices with safe distance from those practices.
Critique ≠ distance

Being close with computational practices is a great way to become critically aware of their possibilities and limitations, and thus slow down reasoning in the way they are appropriated for research (what Rogers (2018) calls “critical analytics”).

Critique ≠ distance

Proximity to practices of datafication, analysis and visualization is also a way to empower engaged publics / stakeholders / users by giving them the possibility to scrutinize socio-technical black boxes and possibly redesign them (what Latour (2005) calls “critical proximity”).


Stop equating SSH uptake of computational methods with user-friendliness and support
SSH uptake ≠ user-friendliness and support

The issue with tools in general, and easy-to-use-tools in particular, is their tendency to prescribe certain forms of analysis. Research design becomes a matter of which buttons can be pushed rather than vice-versa.
SSH uptake ≠ user-friendliness and support

In reality, these scripted solutions often mask a wealth of technical possibilities that are available 'under the hood' and therefore also a range of potential research designs.
inhibition. One should be a methodological expert from computer science, statistics or applied mathematics and the other a domain expert from a field of application that may be broadly chosen (not medicine and clinical research).
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