

## Call for Papers

### **The Empiricist's Challenge: Asking Meaningful Questions in Political Science in the Age of Big Data**

(<http://www.bigdatapoliticalscience.net/>)

October 23-24, 2015, MZES, University of Mannheim, Mannheim, Germany  
Conference Committee: Yannis Theocharis and Andreas Jungherr

#### **Keynote speakers**

W. Lance Bennett, *University of Washington*  
Sandra González-Bailón, *University of Pennsylvania*  
Jonathan Nagler, *New York University*  
Richard Rogers, *University of Amsterdam*

#### **Objective**

The continuously growing use of digital services has provided social scientists with an expanding reservoir of data, potentially holding valuable insights into human behavior and social systems. The potentials of the use of digital trace data in social science research has famously given rise to the terms “big data” and “computational social science”. Using such data, social scientists have argued, will enable us to better understand social, political and economic life through the generation of large datasets that are composed not of questions asked of citizens concerning their attitudes and behaviours, but of the digital traces of their actual behaviour as they navigate the online world.

While the potentials of the use of digital trace data have been a continuous focus in public debate, scientific contributions using such trace data in political science usually come in the form of research-manifestos or isolated proofs-of-concept, only marginally contributing to current debates in the social sciences. Examples abound of descriptive analyses, maps and visualizations of citizens’ or candidates’ social media use during electoral campaigns, or of activists during social movement mobilisations. Indeed, at present, most work using digital trace data in the analysis of political phenomena falls into two categories: (1) Using digital trace data to illustrate online-components of political events, such as protests, televised debates or election campaigns; or (2) Demonstrating that in specific cases, specific selections of digital-trace-data collected on specific services somewhat resembles routinely used metrics in political science such as opinion polls, election results and ideological placement of MPs based on roll-call-data.

Even though there are many interesting and valuable contributions among these studies, for moving into the main stream of political research the field has to mature. This includes: developing standards for data collection, preparation, analysis and reporting; establishing more systematic links between the established body of research in the social sciences; and a move away from proofs-of-concepts towards the systematic development and testing of hypotheses.

The aim of this conference is to contribute to this development. We aim to create a forum where leading practitioners, challengers and up-and-coming social scientists who work in the area of digital trace data meet and engage in debate. Any such endeavor needs to take interdisciplinary considerations into account. We are thus particularly interested in bringing together scholars from different scientific disciplines (such as political science, sociology, media and communication and computer science) who, although increasingly converge in their work around similar questions, often find it difficult to establish productive lines of communication and collaboration.

The papers can address, but should not be limited to, the following topics:

- Which are the areas of political science where the use of digital trace data hold potential and how can this be illustrated systematically?
- Which current theories offer researchers using digital trace data a valuable context to frame their research question and develop and test hypotheses?
- What are the main challenges to be resolved before the use of digital trace data can enter the mainstream of political science?

We invite papers that pursue these questions by specifically discussing the abovementioned challenges, as well as for analytical empirical studies that can serve as exemplars. In particular, we encourage papers discussing theoretical challenges of the use of digital trace data in the social sciences, linking the analysis of digital trace data with established research questions and topics in political science, and discussing on how to establish necessary methodological and procedural challenges in establishing digital trace data as standard elements of social science research.

### **Submissions**

Proposals including a paper title, abstract of up to 500 words, 3-5 keywords and the names and affiliations of all authors should be submitted to the following e-mail address no later than July 13, 2015.

[bigdatapolitics@uni-mannheim.de](mailto:bigdatapolitics@uni-mannheim.de)

Authors of selected high quality contributions will be invited to submit their papers for consideration in a special issue of the *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*. These submissions will undergo the journal's regular peer-review process.

### **Funding**

Travel and accommodation support of up to 300€ for PhD students and postdoctoral fellows will be offered to one author for each accepted paper. By providing resources for the participation of more junior scholars we hope to further encourage their participation. In the case of co-authored work the authors themselves should decide who will receive this support if their paper is accepted. Conference meals, including a conference dinner will also be covered.

### **Keynotes**

We are pleased to have secured the participation of three prolific scholars who with their work have contributed to shaping the use of digital trace data in the social sciences.

W. Lance Bennett, *University of Washington*  
Sandra González-Bailón, *University of Pennsylvania*  
Jonathan Nagler, *New York University*  
Richard Rogers, *University of Amsterdam*

### **Questions?**

Please direct any and all inquiries concerning the workshop, paper submissions and/or funding to:

[bigdatapolitics@uni-mannheim.de](mailto:bigdatapolitics@uni-mannheim.de)

Please visit [www.bigdatapoliticalscience.net](http://www.bigdatapoliticalscience.net) for more details about the conference, and follow the official Twitter account to stay updated with regards to the latest developments.



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