Big Data: Rewards and Risks for the Social Sciences

Thursday 21 - Friday 22 March 2013

Location: Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford, 1 St Giles Oxford OX1 3JS (map)

Registration: Please email your name and affiliation to events@oii.ox.ac.uk or telephone +44 (0)1865 287209

Speakers

Dr Eric T. Meyer
Professor Ralph Schroeder
Linnet E. M. Taylor

Abstract

The Oxford Internet Institute will be holding a 2-day workshop for social scientists who are grappling with the challenges of big data. The workshop is targeted at those who are working at the coal face of big data in the social sciences: those who are doing research using large-scale data and are interested in what this means for the future of the social sciences.

Why is the workshop being held?

We are hoping that this workshop will serve several purposes: to connect researchers facing similar challenges and learn from each other, to inspire new collaborations in this fast-moving area, to move beyond the hype and develop high-powered research agendas and good practices, and to inform a research project that we have on this topic (see Accessing and Using Big Data to Advance Social Science Knowledge project).

What is the format?

Participants will be asked to provide a short position paper (1 page) prior to the workshop which will help form the agenda and to circulate supporting materials (draft papers and the like if they wish). The workshop will not be dominated by Powerpoint presentations; instead, it will consist of short presentations by participants that stimulate discussions of specific challenges that will be framed in the context of ongoing research projects across different disciplines and fields and identify problems and solutions.

Who should attend?

In order to balance experience with new approaches, this workshop is open to pairs of researchers: a senior, established researcher paired with a junior colleague, post-doc or doctoral student. The pairs can be already established, or new pairings that one of the two instigates. In all cases, however, the pair should apply together and tell us how your complementary interests and expertise furthers scholarship across generations of researchers and identify future challenges (training needs, data sharing policies, methodological issues, and the like).

Is it only for academics?

Not at all - we would be particularly interested in people who are using big data in business, government, or other areas to attend, particularly if their research relies on understanding and influencing the social world. Either or both members of the pair can come from these backgrounds.

What if I want to attend, but I don't have a senior/junior partner to apply with?

We would encourage you to seek out a partner, even from outside your institution, who you would like to have a chance to get to know better, to ensure that exchange across experienced and less experienced participants takes place (this may or may not coincide with the senior/junior divide: it may be that younger scholars are highly experienced with big data, and senior researchers have new perspectives on methods - or vice versa!).

How much does it cost to attend? Is there funding available?
The workshop itself is funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, and there is no charge for accepted participants to attend. Accommodation, meals and opportunities to socialize in the beautiful setting of Oxford are included for all participants. We also have additional funds provided by the Digital Social Research Directorate of ESRC available to pay for participants to travel to the workshop. If you need financial assistance to defray your travel costs, please indicate this in your application, and provide an estimate of the cost of your travel to Oxford.

What is "big data" anyway?

This is one of the central questions the workshop will be addressing. Our working definition is that they are data that are unprecedented in scale and scope in relation to a given phenomenon. In other words, data that represents a step change in how a field or discipline is able to address social science questions.

Application procedure

Please send an application to events@oii.ox.ac.uk indicating you are interested in the workshop "Big Data: Rewards and Risks for the Social Sciences". Each application should include names and contact information about both members of the pair (including whether this is an existing or new collaboration), and approximately 500-750 words about what expertise you bring to the workshop, and what you hope to gain from attending. If you are requesting travel funds, also please include a brief annotated budget.

The deadline for applications is Monday, 10 December 2012. Please also feel free to contact us if you have questions:

- Eric T. Meyer (eric.meyer@oii.ox.ac.uk)
- Ralph Schroeder (ralph.schroeder@oii.ox.ac.uk)
- Linnet Taylor (linnet.taylor@oii.ox.ac.uk)

Sponsors and Partners

This workshop is part of a project funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation to understand how big data are being accessed and used to create new knowledge about the social world (see Accessing and Using Big Data to Advance Social Science Knowledge project). Additional funding has been provided by the Digital Social Research Directorate of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) to support participant travel.

Projects

Accessing and Using Big Data to Advance Social Science Knowledge
October 2012 - May 2014
The project will follow ‘big data’ from its public and private origins through open and closed pathways into the social sciences, and document and shape the ways they are being accessed and used to create new knowledge about the social world.

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