


Digital data analysis, public engagement, & the social life of methods



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Our summer scoping study

Question:

- how are digital data methods used and how could they be used by public-sector organizations to measure public engagement and understand their publics?

Findings:

- some digital data methods used, but not systematically/strategically
- focus on top-line quantitative data but recognize that qualitative data could provide new and different insights
- keen to do more but under-resourced
- concerns about the ethics of monitoring/intervening in social media conversations
- social media = a means to promote conversation and public engagement as well as a publicity tool

Our current research

Questions:

- how can those without the economic means to pay for digital data and who want to use it for the public good access it?
- what is the potential application of emerging forms of digital data analysis (e.g., social network analysis, machine learning, and natural language processing) for understanding and engaging publics?
- how are digital data methods interpreted and shaped by actors within specific organizational contexts?
- what are the broader (epistemological, normative) implications of the ways publics are being constituted and made visible through digital data methods?

Our current research

Methods:

- working with 2-3 partner organizations to experiment with the use free tools (Nodexl, Gephi, Overview) to understand and engage publics in different areas (e.g., a council consultation, a photography exhibition)
- observations and interviews are documenting the process at close quarters and (1) charting how the methods and data are interpreted and shaped by different actors and (2) exploring what value and application the methods might have
- tension between us 'guiding' and 'observing' the process