

The London Riots and the Simulation of Sociality in Social Media Data Research

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The concept of collectivity in the social sciences hinges on a tension between technology's propensity for speeding-up and slowing-down, as well as for calculation and change. Furthermore, it implies that the social sciences inhabit this tension by assuming the technological possibility of objectivity, while also performing the idea that true objectivity must rid itself of all limiting techniques. These accelerating tensions then generate 'more true' and more questionable renditions of the social. In order to illustrate the tensions embedded in the concept of collectivity, this article explores the progressive rationale that informed the data mining and modelling conducted by the British newspaper The Guardian around the London riots, which can be understood as the harnessing of change and risk through 'social media' for neoliberal capital. Social science data mining shows itself here to be implicated in an increasingly displaced and oppressive ideal of social change and scientific progress via its utopia of ideal community.

Introduction: The Promises and Perils of Big Data

The reason why such [hooligan] tactics fascinate us, quite apart from moral considerations, is that they constitute a paroxystically up-to-the-minute model, a mirror image of our own disappearance qua political society.

(Baudrillard, 1993, p. 90)

Simulation model validity means 'adequacy with respect to a purpose'.
(Ören and Yilmaz, 2013, p. 164)

Big data, with its promise of novel and in-depth ways of understanding the world, appears as the new buzzword for social science research today. Many in the social sciences and even the humanities are eager to dig into the treasure trove of big data for all kinds of worthy purposes, while some remain sceptical of its usefulness. How may we assess the ways in which new media technologies, with their 'vaults' of big data, alter the face of social science research? Do data mining opportunities through social media allow for better forms of knowledge about the social and society, or do they perhaps base themselves on a profound anti-sociality and anti-truth in light of new media's cybernetic, accelerating, and calculative logic?

In this article I hope to demonstrate how knowledge 'gained' by way of the methodology of social media data mining is at its basis an *analogue* as well as an *allegory* of the technical apparatuses it uses. This is because such knowledge is not only a mere exponent of this apparatus, but also because it points towards the near-perfect obscuring of this apparatus' politics, which I call 'speed-elitism'. The article will substantiate this claim by discussing how the construction of collectivity, accessibility and coherence, especially in relation to the new 'social media', hinges on the tension between modern technology's propensity for speeding-up and slowing-down, and on the tension between calculation and change (as well as 'calculating change') that the social sciences shuttle between. It proposes that especially the social sciences – but also to a lesser extent the humanities – *inhabit* this tension by assuming the technological and methodological possibility of objectivity as a given, while also performing the idea that true objectivity should parse out all assumptions or limiting techniques. Eventually, these accelerated tensions then increasingly generate 'more true' as well as more questionable renditions of the social and the real. I in turn contend that the obsession for data through new media marks the general displacement and simulation of the ideals of humanist and liberal representation due to the acceleration of the political by new media technologies to which much of the social sciences also subscribe. In other words, social science research today, via data mining tools, is potentially implicated in an increasingly displaced and potentially deluded ideal of social change and scientific progress: a utopia of complete knowledge and ideal community.

What is more, I suggest that such a displacement is itself at the heart of contemporary forms of violence under neoliberal globalisation. I therefore seek to press the issue that the ways in which 'speed-elitism' currently aids – but also in-effectuates – traditional scientific research and complicates traditional

methodology, should be taken as the social science's primary and urgent object of analysis. This is because speed-elitism needs to be understood as the near-totalising and highly questionable economic and technological condition of possibility for science, progressive activism, and academic theory today. I use 'speed-elitism' here as a shorthand for those techniques that foster the reproduction of dominant discourses and technologies of *acceleration*, which often express themselves in a worship of technological progress, connectivity, heightened mobility, and crossing borders (like the one between computing and the humanities). Under speed-elitism, new forms of exclusion and disenfranchisement are engendered paradoxically *by way of* a discourse of technological potential and empowerment. I claim that speed-elitism partly replaces Eurocentrism today as the primary nexus around which global and local disparities are organised, and even builds on the formalisation of social differences and hierarchies. This understanding is in line with Hartmut Rosa's assessment of new global power, in which he claims that technological acceleration is "unmasked as a political strategy of immunizing the power of streams that underlies the political project of globalization" (2013, p. 223). Rosa likewise identifies acceleration today as a compulsion in which the mechanism of growth has taken the place of the idea of progress, resulting in a general social transition "from promise to necessity to even threat" (*ibid.*, p. 269). Speed-elitism thus constitutes a liberal-sounding rhetoric servicing an exceedingly mobile and connected cosmopolitan elite which stands to gain the most from the current technological acceleration and financialisation of the globe to the detriment of the less fortunate 'slower' classes.

In order to deepen the above proposition, I will couch my argument in certain critical points made by Jean Baudrillard, Ulrich Beck, Jussi Parikka, Jacques Derrida and Paul Virilio, who discuss the fundamentally altered relationship between 'reality' and representation in an era marked by technological acceleration. I do this in order to demonstrate how the ambiguous status of representation as 'accurate' yet 'removed' from its object returns with a vengeance under speed-elitism. I will in turn discuss the shortcomings of obscuring this fundamental ambiguity of scientific representation as such in the recent push for the 'computational social sciences', which is the general field that encompasses data mining. The aim of these theories and discussions is to create a polemical position vis-à-vis the seemingly progressive rationale that informed

the data gathering and representation carried out by the British newspaper *The Guardian* around the London Riots, which can then be understood as the paradoxical upshot of the harnessing of change and risk through ‘social media’ for neoliberal capital.¹ My central contention here is that, as much as the riots seem to represent a challenge to neoliberal capital, the rendition of these protests through the data mining research carried out by *The Guardian* implicates this research and these media-genic protests in capitalist globalisation, as well as in the ongoing neo-liberal management of the ‘unruly’ populations in the United Kingdom. The fact that most data mining extracts the numbers and runs through the networks of global tech-corporations also suggests that the conflation of the contemporary mobilisation and *functionalisation* of the scientific pursuit – if perhaps not necessarily science as such – and of the economy is indeed pervasive today, and not merely an unfortunate circumstance. I will conclude by discussing what can be done in an era in which speed-elitism has so considerably compromised and hence raised the stakes for the progressive social sciences and humanities.

Techno-capitalist Appropriation and Containment of Social Risk

Speed-elitism presents itself in the case of the well-meaning social sciences by seeking to come to terms with and comprehend an event like the London Riots, as the ongoing dissolution of the boundary between socially minded research and capitalism through data mining technologies. My position here seeks to integrate the insights of Jean Baudrillard and Ulrich Beck on simulation and risk society. Beck in *World at Risk* and Baudrillard in ‘For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign’ both claim – albeit in very different ways – that contemporary capitalism creates and in turn expropriates sites of tension, difference and risk. In *World at Risk*, as well as in many of his other works, Beck astutely analyses what he terms this “dynamic of world risk society” (2009, p. 81). He suggests that the general covering up or dramatisation of risk results in a politics of anticipation, exemplified by apocalyptic narratives and debatable scientific models that are themselves thoroughly implicated in the ongoing financialisation and militarisation of the globe. While Beck proposes this analysis in *World at Risk* in relation to ecological narratives and responses, I suggest that his point about scientific modelling is equally applicable to any perceived threat that apparently requires a form of pre-emptive policing, especially through new media technologies. Baudrillard, partly in line with Beck, similarly argues that under our

contemporary form of capitalism, the symbolic realm and capital's reliance on information flows have collapsed into one another (in particular see Baudrillard, 2001). The resultant simulation of sociality, for instance through the portrayal of the supposedly actual existence in society of heroes, victims, and perpetrators in the media, relies on the representational fallacy that this sociality is empirically real and resides outside the capitalist logic of reproduction through social destruction and fragmentation. The destruction endemic to capitalism is hence by way of such portrayals projected onto 'risky' populations in need of further technologically enhanced containment.

Furthering Beck and Baudrillard's analysis, I suggest that capitalism today seizes the ambiguity of *scientific* representation by incessantly calling upon and usurping the hope for a more meaningful living-together that forms of activism and engaged social science work respond to. This acceleration of scientific representation is possible because the scientific utopia of pure objectivity and of the unmediated representation of reality is today enacted through the fantasy of technological superiority that also stimulates capitalism. It is here that the tension between calculation and change, in its very desire to technologically predict and classify events and groups, leads the social sciences into a kind of contemporary paroxysm; it wants to foster positive social change, but this very endeavour is produced in response to and in turn usurped by speed-elitism. Nonetheless, I will also press the point that such risk management engenders an increasingly unknown aspect to contemporary society, so that such risk management can never harness social change over an infinite amount of time. This means that the representations, or rather, the seemingly neutral *presentations* of data about the Riots generated through data mining do not inform us about the social, but function as a smokescreen in order to dissimulate the contemporary disintegration of the social, both in the United Kingdom and abroad. I agree here with Baudrillard's (1996) assessment of this implosion of 'old' ideals of representation into capital circulation, where he argues that at issue is an entire political economy built on an accelerated *modelling* of the semiotic-economic sphere. This sphere today crucially relies on the reproduction of the ideals of communicability to which the social sciences tend to subscribe. I suggest, following Baudrillard, that the abundant circulation and mobilisation of data hence produces 'phantom collectives' like 'young males', 'the black community' and 'people directly involved', while in actual fact those collectives and their alleged coherence are ever more radically absent from the social under speed-elitism. What is more, the simulation of such 'unruly' phantom collectives in the

media serves to give the general appearance of a supposedly otherwise peaceful, well organised, and coherent social reality. I am further in agreement with Baudrillard's claims that the general nostalgia for the social and attempts to 'unearth' it – in this case, by way of a kind of social scientific risk management – are the main mechanisms for the fragmentation and individualisation of persons under this economy. This is, as I will explain more later on, because both the 'accuracy' and the 'removedness' from the object of nostalgia is accelerated and intensified today. The realm of scientific representation, as Baudrillard (1996, p. 60) suggests, therefore constitutes a simulacrum of power due to the fact that it simulates and dissimulates (conceals and renders indecipherable) the "true mechanism" of power. The media here functions as "camouflage" by way of which "long-lost traditional values reappear as signs" (ibid., p. 62) in order to "make up for the symbolic void of power" and its main "excuse", namely social coherence and harmony (ibid., p. 54). In turn, any invitation by those media to use them – whether by activists or academics – effectively implicates the utopia of progress and liberation in the vicissitudes of speed-elitism.²

This 'invitation' to use digital media for progressive analysis is therefore paradoxically an outflow of the humanist duty of the social sciences to move society forward, and the culmination – in the sense of idealisation as well as termination – of this duty into the contemporary tools of acceleration. We should note, then, from the outset that fostering *change* is one of the key aims of the current neoliberal paradigm, but also of progressive political and intellectual movements that increasingly organise themselves through so-called social media. Popular activist rhetoric and social science methodology has for many decades emphasised the facilitation of collection and collectivity that these media provide for – whether this entails social community or the coherence and intelligibility of reality through data mining. In light of this, it might be revealing to trace back where, how and in what forms the reliance on data gathering through various modern media have informed or run parallel to the development and goals of the social sciences – indeed, to ask when questions of humanity and sociality became scientific questions as such. I lack the space to address this tracing in its historical totality here, but in any case want to indicate for now that this rhetoric and these research assumptions maintain that social science's involvement with digital and social media can or will facilitate 'changing society for the better', either by allowing for new communities or by allowing researchers to create a 'better picture' of society and reality.

Acceleration and Social Utopia in Computational Social Science

The progressive and hopeful assumption that the social sciences rely upon emerges powerfully in the seminal article on data mining published in *Science* (Lazer et al., 2009). The article claims that our transactions in the global virtual network leave “digital traces that can be compiled into comprehensive pictures ... with the potential to transform our understanding of our lives, organisations, and societies” (Lazer et al., 2009, p. 721). The article also maintains that the great advantage of data mining is that, unlike older anthropological and ethnological ways of data collection, it provides “information about the structure and content of relationships” that allows for the prediction of “individual and group performance”, “epidemiological insights”, as well as “rumors or positions about political issues” (ibid., p. 722). Social science data mining hence has “the capacity to collect and analyze data with an unprecedented breadth and depth and scale” because virtual data sets “by their nature capture a complete record of human behavior” (ibid.). The dream of total prediction here already implicates the article’s progressive social science ideals in a questionable form of population management and the raising of individual and group productivity under risk society. What is more, the assumption and perhaps the hope expressed by Lazer is that new technologies will allow the social sciences to ‘dig deeper’ and go beyond a merely superficial understanding of the social and its supposedly disappointing textual representation in old social science literature.

Besides the perhaps overly optimistic tone of this article, the assumption that data is to be ‘mined’ is profoundly problematic. The ‘mining’ metaphor assumes a kind of archaeological effort into the hidden bits of a media archive that Jacques Derrida unsettles in his book *Archive Fever* (1998). Derrida here insightfully holds that:

The technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization *produces* as much as it records the event. (Derrida, 1998, p. 17, emphasis added)

What Derrida is suggesting is that the (media) archive pretends to be a neutral tool; neutral with respect to human subjectivity and interpretation, in which the data supposedly 'speaks for itself'. But the archive is in fact not neutral; rather, it makes possible what Derrida (1998, p. 1) terms a "commencement" or a narrative of origin and progress (as well as the obsession with classification and recording), and a "commandment" – that is, it seeks to validate and in turn institutionalise law and authority by way of hiding its own logic. This supposition of 'depth' by way of data mining, both in the technological collection and analysis of data, therefore harbors a specific phenomenological understanding of the term 'data' that Alex Galloway (2011, p. 87) describes as the conception of data as raw facts or "givens". Galloway usefully shows that the synonym 'information' actually suggests that there is always a 'form' or an aesthetic aspect at work in the generation of data. I would, moreover, propose that the etymology of 'data' and its kinship to the gift or dowry (see Klein, 1966, p. 468), as well as to the date on a calendar of events (i.e. a given point in time and place), reveals the quality of displacement at work in data mining. This is because this etymology points to something being 'taken away' from its proper time and place. What is more, its etymology reveals that this displacement harbours an excess (a 'gift') that continuously *haunts* data mining methodology as well as the contemporary economic and scientific endeavour in general despite all well-meaning attempts to stamp it out.

In line then with what I proposed earlier in relation to the return of scientific ambiguity, Baudrillard posits that the very quest to technologically eliminate unpredictability and negativity precisely results in their resurrection, as such negativity and unpredictability are endemic to any attempt at total systemisation (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 121). Extending this claim, I suggest that this excess currently re-appears in the form of a sort of 'accursed share' that the social sciences seek to purge from society, namely the seemingly gratuitous violence under neoliberal globalisation that is intimately entwined with modern technology. The paradox of the situation is hence once more that the aggravation of global violence and disenfranchisement today is an unfortunate *effect of*, rather than despite, such well-meaning efforts by social scientists and activists. And yet, as social scientists, we cannot help but enact our responsibility today through this very complicity. Elsewhere Baudrillard qualifies this contemporary paradoxical situation therefore as 'fatal' not only because the social sciences engage in the creation of fatalities by way of their 'fatal speed,' but need themselves to (or have

themselves already) *become* fatalities of their own analyses as well (see Baudrillard, 2007, p. 74). Despite their relative ubiquity, then, the social sciences, mirroring the subsequent worsening of the crises of capitalism, show themselves perhaps likewise to be ‘fatally wounded’ in their data mining efforts.

My argument on the contemporary paroxysm of the social sciences also seeks to corroborate Parikka’s (2011) claim that the social sciences from the 1950s onwards became permeated with the cybernetic feedback model set up by Shannon and Weaver’s famous attempts at ‘noise control’ for electronic signal transmission. Parikka (2011, p. 262) usefully reads Shannon and Weaver’s attempts as part of “a history of achieving predictability” in the sciences at large that has resulted in the problematic equation of finding solutions for mechanical disorganisation – and I would suggest social disorganisation as well – with ways of eliminating noise by technological means. Insofar as the new media are cybernetic archiving technologies, he proposes that the ‘objects’ in such an archive, just like my suggestion that data mining visualisations are allegories of the mining system, are “visible or audible to the extent that they conform to the archive’s own protocol” (Parikka, 2011, p. 256). Alt (2011, p. 299) also illustrates how this protocol bases itself on a medialisiation of computation through object-oriented programming, which aligns the logic of digital media with systems theory and its “ideological offspring” the New Economy. Alt argues that, since “anyone who wishes to receive a message embedded in the medium must first have internalized the medium”, “object orientation recodes all aspects of the non-computational world in very real ways” (*ibid.*, p. 298). I agree with Alt that computing today hides its internals by presenting functionality in the form of believable simulations for risk society. I furthermore concur with Parikka (2011, p. 257) that this means that we are today effectively dealing with “another mode of politics than the politics of representation”. What we see emerge is namely a politics that is intimately intertwined with the primary aesthetics of acceleration and simulation of these data mining systems, making it vital that we grasp better how the cybernetic attempt at purging ‘the accursed share’ via ‘noise’ and the resultant simulation of sociality is directly related to the violence of social exclusion and fragmentation under speed-elitism. As Parikka (2011, p. 273) succinctly puts it: “Increasingly it seems that noise is our ontology – but also our politics”.

I would like to reformulate this central concern with ‘noise’ and connect it to the fundamentally progressive *spirit* of the social sciences, which has been usurped by the compulsion for acceleration. Against a reductive understanding of spirituality as mere religiosity, I suggest we understand spirit as *irreducible* to yet also *constitutive of* sociality, rationality, and indeed of technological calculation and communicative transportation.³ This recuperation of the spirit of the social sciences is hence essential vis-à-vis the complicities that the social sciences currently inhabit yet dissimulate, and may be understood as an appreciation of ‘noise’, that is, that which is indeed irreducible to yet constitutive of communication and community as such.

‘London Riots’ Research as a Doubling of Social Destruction

Let us now look at *The Guardian* research, which used social media data to bring the truth and excitement of the Riots to the general public.⁴ In the online newspaper’s Reading the Riots project website, the researchers, who hailed from the London School of Economics, the National Centre for Social Research and Manchester University, claim in a well-meaning and seemingly neutral way that their “aim was to produce evidence-based social research that would help explain why the rioting spread across England” (Guardian Interactive Team, 2011a). The project website contains various in-depth articles and interviews, a wide spectrum of elegant data visualisations and data journalism pieces, as well as a number of videos of the riots and a documentary about policemen’s traumatic experiences. In order to generate a better understanding of why the riots happened, the researchers used data mining of social media – in particular Twitter and Facebook – in combination with the in-depth interviews with “hundreds of people directly involved”, as well as members of the police and the courts (Guardian Interactive Team, 2011b). Through cross-coupling the results of these methods the researchers collected and categorised basic demographic data about the interviewees, including “where they lived, their age and ethnicity, educational qualifications, previous criminal history and whether they worked” (ibid.). The researchers mention that many were keen to be interviewed, because “they wanted their story to be heard” (ibid.). All the information was in turn labelled and coded, and eventually, “the relationships between the themes were displayed on a thematic map document, allowing the team to see the larger,

overall picture as a cohesive set of findings began to emerge” (ibid.). This ‘overall picture’ revealed for instance that most Rioters were young males, and that there was a correlation between criminality, moral decline, and rioting. They also conclude that while many rioters reported poverty as a reason for rioting, the data shows that this correlation is not as strong as these other correlations. The researchers finally conclude that the project was eminently successful by claiming that they managed to “create a comprehensive picture of what really went on”, boasting that “Data has too often been seen as abstract to real lives. Not anymore” (Guardian Interactive Team, 2011b).

The Reading the Riots website provides a most interesting example of the speed-elitist politics of prediction at work in ‘eliminating noise’, both in its old-fashioned representational politics through the stories and videos that imbue a pacifying Hollywood-like logic of heroes, villains, and victims, but especially in its digital presentation of the data mappings. Moreover, the project exemplifies how well-meaning social scientists and external supporters – one of them, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which combats poverty through economic growth and innovation – via their tools of analysis become complicit in an ongoing managerial effort around England’s population. This general covering up or dramatisation of risk that Beck alludes to becomes apparent in the main tagline that reads ‘Policing the Riots’. I suggest what is happening on as well as through the website is an appeal to ‘depth’ and ‘truth’ via conventional but especially new media methodologies that dissimulate the disintegration and disappearance of the social in England and its general implosion of the masses into the media. What is more, the riots are also themselves symptomatic of the reverse, that is, the implosion of media technologies into the masses. I suggest that this is because the rioters simply displayed the logic of a global order in which destruction has become directly endemic to innovation; and as progressively more populations become the targets of this speed-elitist economic order, the rioters inhabited this logic by themselves turning into unguided projectiles and loose cannons, targeting and transgressing a variety of physical borders throughout various cities, causing their own version of ‘collateral damage’. The rioting thus appears irrational and in need of containment precisely because it mirrors the irrationality of that speed-elitist order.⁵ Furthermore, the rioters transformed themselves into a spectacle for the media because total visibility and transparency is after all what

this order desires. Not surprisingly then, their 'empowerment' through these social media and transportation tools was immediately followed by their surveillance, incarceration, and demonisation at the hands of the police and the state.

This becomes obvious when we download the many Excel spreadsheets and tables that provided the groundwork for the researchers' data analytics: most of these spreadsheets are about reasons for arrest and the socio-economic statuses of the rioters. Not only do the coding devices for the interviews, as in all social research, lead to circular conclusions about 'young males' and 'moral decline' and so forth while erasing other possible connections from view beforehand, but also the statistics presented through data mining generate a pretence of truth that is highly implicated in societal risk management. This becomes all the more apparent when a police officer in one of the online videos warns the public that 'this will happen again for sure' and that they therefore need more policemen and especially more social media surveillance tools for the police, because with such tools the riots could anyway have been predicted and pre-empted.⁶ The data images here embody the quintessence of the scientific representational ideal, while in effect producing accelerated flows of information by way of supposedly politically neutral social media corporations. This obsession with the data image depleted of its radical content found its culmination in the highly aestheticised imagery that *The Guardian* research project generated of the rioters' twitter feeds. Among these twitter simulations are an elegant in-and-out-sliding system of balloons containing numbers and percentages of various criminal charges, a collection of colourful interactive timelines showing the number of tweets per city as the riots spread, and an animation of how rioters commuted to perpetrate offences, dissecting the rioters into 'males' and 'females'. Classification into data sheets here gives way to the even more powerful form of dissimulation by way of the comprehensive aestheticisation of data. Eventually though, this computationally impressive imagery tells us nothing about the dire state of democracy and the hardships of marginalisation and poverty in the United Kingdom, and everything about the supposedly sublime beauty of the new media technologies themselves.⁷ Even more interestingly, these data images could be said to be works of art despite the fact that they claim to be factual. We can see that in such images the fundamentally ambiguous nature of representation returns with a vengeance, as these interfaces

generate images that are ‘more accurate’ and insightful as well as ‘more removed’ and beautified. By implicitly celebrating the beauty of these new technologies, then, these *Guardian* images are primarily justifying the speed-elite by providing an alibi to technocracy. The fact that the harvesting of data by the researchers took place through the corporate websites and servers of Twitter, Facebook, and a variety of local internet service providers, also exhibits the complicity of such research with the flows of capitalism, and illustrates Baudrillard claim of the collapse of the symbolic into the machinery of capitalism. This means that the research, while making a socially motivated attempt at accuracy and uncovering the truth, actually participates in ultimately irresponsible mobilisations of data-imagery that dissimulates its violence.

Visualisation/Blindness: The Social as Technological Function

If we can recognize this speed-elitist problematic of *The Guardian* research project in many other uses of such data-methods in the social sciences, this would constitute a damning rendition of the ‘computational turn’ in the modern social sciences. It appears that the new methodologies in the social sciences consist of a very particular, contemporary, and exceedingly pervasive form of the aestheticisation of violence under neoliberal globalisation, which works no longer by way of non-representation or mis-representation, but by way of a total penetration of the social and the individual by way of *totally presenting while destroying* – a ‘purging of noise’ and ‘deviancy’ in the most oppressive and aggressive way. Even so, for more explicitly politically oriented or engaged social research, the hope might still be that, by virtue of these new and ‘more revealing’ data sets about the riots and other baffling events, previously marginalised groups and individuals can build new alliances in order to put pressure on the fostering of change towards social equality and inclusiveness, and the social sciences could in turn show how these new online alliances and more generally a new sociality was and is being formed.

However, I suggest once more that it is not so easy to disentangle such good intentions from speed-elitism, as today the latter always appropriates such intentions for its own ends. Such a hope – which is aptly captured in Lazer et al.’s (2009, p. 722) use of the term “sociometers”, as well as in Richard Roger’s (2013,

p. 153) idea of “postdemographics” – still takes as its foundational assumption that the fabrication or generation of more ‘sociality’ and social harmony is always better – an assumption that has very much shaped the field of communication studies which has since its inception sought to re-purpose communication technologies for the eventual improvement of social cohesion, democracy, or community (on this see Peters, 2000). What is more, the social sciences universalise a certain concept or representation into the ‘fact’ of the social themselves; that is, they presuppose the existence of the social as the *a priori* of the social sciences. In order to open up in all its complexity the issue of what this problem of ‘mining’ for facts about society via the media reveals, I further propose that the social sciences have in fact been historically *burdened* with the task to produce a capitalist ‘alibi’ in the form of a semblance of the social in the media which can then ‘prove’ the materialisation of social progress under capitalism. This assessment agrees with Baudrillard’s (2007, p. 80) suggestion that the social sciences “came to consecrate this obviousness and agelessness of the social”. For Baudrillard, the increasing mediation of social groups in the media – media that are said to produce and reflect existing ‘social relations’ – in fact marks the loss of sociality’s “symbolic dimension” (ibid., p. 82) because technologies replace “symbolic integration ... by functional integration” (Alt, 2011, p. 85). This also leads to the paradox that social relations seem to “fester” and “proliferate with this disintegration” (Baudrillard, 2007, p. 85). A case in point is the very existence of so-called ‘social media’ as such, which constitutes the epitome of the objectification of social relations into the machinery of globalisation, and which rioters and researchers use abundantly. In other words, the ‘social’ of social media functions as an ideal term to obscure the fact that the social is disappearing rapidly under neoliberal globalisation – leaving many by the wayside.

Paul Virilio (1994) argues that new media engender a rapid fragmentation and disintegration of communities, societies and the real due to new media’s aesthetic of acceleration and simulation. This critical argument agrees well with a general subjective sensation in post-industrial societies of the ongoing acceleration and disorientation of daily life, which makes it feel hard for many to “keep up” (Rosa, 2013, p. 311). Indeed, if collectivities in general today are becoming increasingly ‘computerised’, ‘data-based’, and calculated through the realms of new and social media, then the new digital prostheses that are the social media provide us with an *illusion* of collection and collectivity, as well as of

the coherence and accessibility of the real, in order to fill the fissures left by neoliberal fragmentation. The object 'riot' is then constituted in *The Guardian* research as the negative of the object 'the social,' it is a symptom of the death of the social by way of new media technologies. In other words, the object 'riot' (and why not 'revolution' as with the Arab Spring) eventually marks the disorientation, destruction and disorganisation typical of technological acceleration. It is an irresponsible "immunizing of the power streams", as Rosa (2013, p. 223) suggests. For this reason, the surveillance scholar David Lyon sees "the data-image [as] distanced from the person, and thus also from forms of accountability and responsibility that might be expected in relationships" (1994, p. 206). *The Guardian* research team, but also the Rioters themselves, tweeting and texting their way through the suburbs, are hence exponents of a pervasive rendering impotent of true responsibility.⁸ Virilio's revealing interpretation of the media as progressively distancing or obscuring potential elements of experience here echoes Heidegger's (1977) ideas about the vicissitudes of calculation for thought and experience. Heidegger suggests that modern technologies increasingly conceal the never-neutral ways in which what is presented is fundamentally revealed through the technological form. He further asserts that contemporary technology marks the completion or death of philosophy into its logical culmination, the techno-sciences, of which the social sciences likewise take part. In Heidegger's view, every conceptualisation will end up as a mere calculated digit in the new cybernetic space of flows. Philosophy can become that culmination because it has itself always assumed the ideal of transparent communication through the belief that its concepts and models are transcendental truths. This completion of philosophy, according to Heidegger, means that "Cybernetics transforms language into an exchange of news ... scientific truth is equated with efficiency ... [and] the operational and model-based character of representational-calculative thinking becomes dominant" (1977, p. 434). Heidegger cautions that this kind of thinking, whether it takes the form of rationalist philosophy or social scientific empiricism, is in fact not thinking at all, but merely the unthinking performance of a pre-described path of interpretation that has become ignorant of its grounding gestures that only allow it to 'reveal' in ways reducible to the cybernetic logic.

What I take from Virilio and Heidegger is that, in order for the media to appear as transparent or noise-free so that the social sciences can 'harness' them for their research, their fundamental aspects – namely the ways in which they are implicated in a representational regime that is intertwined with the modern economic and social organisation, hierarchisation and classification of all of society's creatures – need to be suppressed or set aside as secondary as Derrida and Baudrillard suggest. Galloway also argues that under the contemporary regime of incessant control and calculation any "visualization is first and foremost a visualization of the [media's] conversion rules themselves" (2011, p. 88). I agree with Galloway that such visualisations, like those provided by sophisticated data mining software, then actually lead to a "form of blindness" towards the technical apparatus as well as to the current mode of economic production (*ibid.*, p. 95). However, the problematic is, I suggest, similarly applicable to other representations and interpretations of data that are non-visual; in fact, any claim to 'deep reading' may be subject to such a contention – perhaps even those made by Baudrillard, Virilio, Heidegger, and Galloway themselves. They are in the end analyses that carry forward the liberal utopian hope for a more just social world, just like the social sciences in general aspire to do, and just like this article ultimately does.

Conclusion: Whither the Social Sciences?

So where does this unsettling of the sciences and of philosophy lead us and what can be our response? As I said, the new media through which data mining takes place can be understood as a Derridean archive. If we follow Derrida's (1998) claim that the archive exemplifies our fear of death – that is, it is symptomatic of us wanting to claim some semblance of everlasting, universal authority – as much as the death drive – in the sense of always seeking to destroy what Baudrillard terms the 'accursed share' – then there must inevitably be a lot of destruction and repression in general going on in global society. It is in this sense that data mining methodology presents an allegory of the tools it uses; this use results in total truth as well as the overall destruction of truth and the social, inundated in a false rhetoric of progress. As Parikka points out, it is this new political logic that is becoming more and more pervasive today, and to which we as socially engaged academics urgently need to formulate an adequate response. Even so, I also

propose that we could conversely claim that the assessment of social fragmentation by critics like Baudrillard and Virilio inhabits a problematic nostalgia for an 'original' ideal collectivity and sociality, as well as an access to reality via human experience and 'direct' data that never was – a nostalgia that is therefore possibly just as much an effect of new media's sped-up aesthetics of simulation. Derrida (1998, p. 85) illustrates that all "nostalgia" for our human or social "origin" becomes not only our main existential condition under the weight of an ever more pervasive archiving fever, but is indeed an *effect* of these archiving technologies. As I suggested at the start of this article, the nostalgic performance itself may here also be implicated in the fragmentation and individualisation of persons under speed-elitism. Similarly, while Galloway rightly critiques the role of simulation in this new control regime, he also performs his academic duty to represent 'the givens' *more accurately*, in a similar nostalgic vein as Virilio. And Heidegger forgets that if all conceptualisation has ended up as cybernetic flows, then these flows can never exercise total dominance. After all, Heidegger's mounting of such a critical analysis is itself done through the tools and techniques of philosophical 'unearthing'. The possibility of his critical conceptualisation is therefore due to the fact that there will always be 'noise' surrounding any cybernetic system – that aspect inherent in all communication. As Bill Readings so aptly put it in his foreword to Lyotard's *Political Writings*, "no knowledge can save us (from) thinking" (1993, p. xvii).

Pushing this argument to its culmination then, one could maintain that scientific 'data' and empirical claims about society were *always already* 'compromised' by the politics of research. This suggests that 'the social' was indeed never homogeneous, harmonious, or whole, but that today such a compromise is increasingly coming to light as well as dissimulated by the progressive techniques of data-gathering and community-building themselves. In other words, data mining is both the salvation and the condemnation of the progressive spirit of the social sciences. It is the growing tension between these two ostensibly 'true' conclusions that will engender the return of chance despite (or rather, because of) all the risk management, so that occurrences like the riots and the managerial-scientific attempts at techno-analytic containment might after all open up to a true event. This finally also means that this article just as much *fatally* performs this polemical duty in order to move the social sciences

forward towards a better or deeper understanding of their assumptions around social media data. This article therefore has performed a kind of humanistic data mining, if you will, downloading and presenting its 'givens' via *The Guardian* website and international internet server providers, and disseminating it via a scholarly journal. It is therefore itself implicated in risk management and speed-elitism, but perhaps at least it is more self-aware in doing so. And after all, if we, as social scientists and humanists, suffer today from the feverish responsibility to fix the world brought about by these new technologies of acceleration, this rewriting nonetheless also implies the possibility of a future to come, if only by way of unexpected yet revealing 'disasters' like the riots. The 'accursed share' will always return with a vengeance proportional to our responsible efforts for 'society', and this is finally also its promise. So what perhaps becomes apparent by way of this Baudrillardian 'fatal strategy' is the fact that the humanities and the social sciences can participate in preserving their spirit through the recuperation of 'noise' via their own deconstruction; a recuperation which we should start appreciating it as spiritual, and *not* as foremost concerned with 'functionality', 'truth' or 'reality.' Because information no longer accurately represents anything today – and in fact, *it never did*.

Notes

- ¹ I must mention here that, while data mining today generally concerns two possibly technologised layers of 'translation' – the mediated data collection itself, and modes of analysis via algorithms and such – I will not distinguish between these layers in relation to *The Guardian* research because my central thesis regarding the duality of representation remains the same.
- ² I present an extensive analysis of the complicity and promise of activist endeavours and projects in relation to 'speed-elitism' in my book *Ambiguities of Activism* (2012).
- ³ This idea of recuperating spirituality from religiosity is indebted to Bernard Stiegler's (2013) timely polemic, especially pp. 105-19.
- ⁴ Guardian Interactive Team (2011): 'Reading the Riots. Investigating England's Summer of Disorder.' *The Guardian*, August – December 2011. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/series/reading-the-riots>.

⁵ Similarly, this attempt at discursive containment by way of a refusal to connect the riots to issues around the deficits of local and overseas authority was also the hallmark of the news reporting of the riots in Singapore's Little India district, which took place while I was finalising this article.

⁶ See the videos at <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/video/2012/jul/02/reading-riots-video> and <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/video/2012/jul/02/policing-england-riots-scale-video>.

⁷ For some good examples of such imagery, see <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/interactive/2011/dec/07/london-riots-twitter>, <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/interactive/2011/sep/05/england-riots-timeline-interactive>, and <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/datablog/video/2011/dec/05/england-riots-commute-map>.

⁸ It is for this reason also that, while I agree with Alain Badiou's (2012) understanding as this era being an 'age of riots', I object to his more optimistic reading of the 'immediate riot' that was the United Kingdom version as foremost subversive of power.

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