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SJS, Special Issue: Big Visual Data as a New Form of Knowledge

Deadline: Nov 15, 2022

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Swiss Journal of Sociology (SJS) Special Issue:
Big Visual Data as a New Form of Knowledge. Theoretical Approaches, Methodological Procedures and Empirical Analyses.

Guest editor: Sebastian W. Hoggenmüller

The proliferation of smartphones, image-based instant messaging services (e.g., Snapchat) and photo- or video-sharing platforms (e.g., YouTube, TikTok, Imgur, Instagram) is expanding the intensity and scope of visual communication as a mode of everyday interpersonal communication. At the same time, images, videos, and other visual media are playing an increasingly important role in various areas of society. Amid the advancing digitalisation of everyday social life in general, and of visual communication in particular, these media are becoming increasingly numerous and diverse.

This planned special issue is dedicated to these emerging visual forms of expression, means of communication and methods. By addressing the phenomenon of Big Visual Data from a social science perspective, this special issue explores — put briefly — extensive, complex, and dynamic visual data volumes, as well as the associated changes in the social meanings, functions, and ways of using images and visual communication media. It pursues three main interests: (1) To theoretically discuss and conceptually define the phenomenon of Big Visual Data in its various manifestations, especially regarding its special communicative quality and social potential. (2) To discuss existing methodical and methodological approaches, to critically reflect on their epistemological premises and scientific-theoretical backgrounds, as well as to develop and lay the foundations for new methodological approaches appropriate to studying Big Visual Data. (3) To empirically analyze and determine the epistemic nature of Big Visual Data, in relation both to digitally mediated social realities and to the visual processes of constituting and constructing social knowledge.

Accordingly, possible topics and questions include, but are not limited to:

I. Approaches that focus on Big Visual Data as bearers and transmitters of social meaning, ones that not only depict and convey but also construct social knowledge and social reality in their own way; projects that describe the inherent logic of media and the potential for generating the meaning and significance of such large image streams and image networks in digital communication contexts, especially in contrast to the constitution of meaning and significance in individual images and image clusters; work that investigates what digital image communication and Big Visual Data mean in society at large, which changes they cause in specific social contexts and

how, among other things, visual self-representation, visual data accumulation, visual knowledge and (counter-)power or increasing digital image communication and digital transformation are related in general;

II. Projects that examine how quantitative, qualitative or mixed-methods designs can be successfully conceived to study Big Visual Data, as well as what the specific potential and limitations of such designs are; contributions that illumine how Big Visual Data in general and the associated multimodal forms of communication in the social web in particular can be researched; papers that address how data collection, storage, and processing can be carried out in Big Visual Data studies and how patterns can be recognized in large visual data sets in a methodically controlled manner, especially in AI-based data processing and analysis; or to what extent computer-aided processes and digital resources already used successfully in data mining and in analyzing textual data can also be employed and adapted with regard to explicitly visual data volumes;

III. Contributions that analyze concrete practices and phenomena in connection with the production, distribution and reception of Big Visual Data: for example, contributions that address specific collection strategies and archiving processes in the context of digital image databases (not least in the sciences themselves), that examine AI-based image generation (e.g., Dall-E or MidJourney) or public surveillance systems; studies that compare visualization standards with different communicative goals and target groups (e.g., reports vs. dashboards) or that develop new concepts of innovative data visualizations (e.g., for science communication in the form of interactive infographics or public installations); empirical analyses of the everyday use of image-based social media feeds, of deep-learning algorithms (e.g., in medical diagnostics), of automated image attribute recognition processes, visual meta-tagging, and image-based cataloguing as part of recommender systems.

Considering these and other possible problems, this special issue aims to comprehensively address the social phenomenon of Big Visual Data and the resulting scientific data as an independent form of producing, disseminating, and implementing knowledge, as well as examine in-depth theoretical-conceptual, methodological-methodical, and empirical-analytical questions. Accordingly, besides sociological papers, contributions from other fields — including philosophy and cultural studies, art and media studies, visual culture studies and image science (Bildwissenschaft), digital humanities, human-computer interaction, interaction design, creative artificial intelligence and information design, as well as neighbouring or related disciplines — are explicitly welcome. We are interested especially in papers that address one (or several) of the above thematic interests, thereby contributing to the overarching aim of the special issue: to combine a genuine epistemological interest with a social science perspective.

Proposals should be submitted to the guest editor (sebastian.hoggenmueller@unilu.ch) by 15 November 2022.

Please include the following details:
- Name, email address, and affiliations of all contributing authors
- Title of contribution
- Abstract of approx. 500 words (which clearly links the proposed contribution to the problems and thematic concerns of the social sciences in general or the sociology of knowledge in particular).

Authors will be notified by 20 December 2022 whether their proposed contribution has been accepted. The selected contributors will be invited to submit their manuscript (max. 8,000 words, 50,000 characters including tables, figures and references) by 1 June 2023. Contributions will be subject to the usual peer-review process of the Swiss Journal of Sociology. Proposals as well as contributions may be written in English, German or French. The special issue will be published in print and Open Access ("Gold Road"; swissuniversities). More information on the Swiss Journal of Sociology (including manuscript submission guidelines) is available at https://szs.sgs-sss.ch/.

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