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The death of data interpretation and throwing sheep in a postdigital age

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Extended summary. This paper argues that in the postdigital age there is an increasing shift away from understanding or undertaking in-depth data interpretation in qualitative research. The article begins by outlining what is meant by the postdigital; defined here as a stance towards the digital which seeks to challenge the educational, economic, and ethical impact of digital technology on humanity and the environment. It is suggested that research in postdigital spaces becomes slippery as they morph, change, and evolve, which in turn contributes to the perceived ungraspability of the postdigital, and suggests that postdigital research is marked by uncertainty, liminality and mystery that can feel threatening, at worst, and transformative, at best. Thus, postdigital research is deeply troublesome. The article then explores the idea of throwing sheep. The idea of ‘throwing a sheep meme’ originates from a Facebook application that used to allow people to ‘throw a sheep’ at friends to poke fun at them. It was later popularised further in a book by Fraser and Dutta (2010) that explored the power of online social networking sites. It is used here as a metaphor to poke fun at the way in which qualitative data are overmanaged in the digital age. Examples of this include hollow analysis, unsophisticated charts, cleaning data and hiding themes, using software suites and ignoring subtext.

The second section of the paper argues that the art of data interpretation is dead, due to the use of short data, poor methodology, a lack of conceptual frameworks, discounted positionality and the overlooking of the importance of representation and portrayal. It addresses each of these issues and then suggests ways in which the death of data interpretation might be avoided. What is also important is the notion of the researcher’s stance. Forms of representation do tend to relate to the specific research approach adopted since what is central to the issues of representation is the positioning of the researcher and research. Thus, another way of examining representation is to consider the way in which conceptual frameworks and researcher stances can be used to ensure rigour in the representation process.

Options for avoiding the death of data interpretation include researchers examining hidden meanings: the subtext, as well as metaphor, portrayal and representation. Whilst these approaches are familiar to many qualitative researchers, the final section of the paper argues for the importance of digital métissage and liquid methodologies. Digital métissage captures the idea of blurring genres, texts, histories and stories in digital formats that recognise the value and spaces between and across cultures, generations and representational forms. Research and meaning making in the digital age mean trajectories are not straightforward, and managing this digital métissage offers interesting, if challenging possibilities. Digital métissage is based on the idea of literary métissage. Literary métissage is the process of creating stories that are braided together and rooted in history and memory, as well as being stories of becoming.

The idea of liquid methodologies is based on the idea that while it is useful to have underpinning philosophies from which to draw, it is also vital when undertaking research in digital spaces to recognise the need for liquidity. Bauman describes the world, as ‘sliced into poorly coordinated fragments while our individual lives are cut into a succession of ill-connected episodes’ (2004:12-13). As researchers we draw of philosophies and into this position

ourselves methodologically. Yet even in taking such a stance these fragments of our lives and our data that do not fit. Whilst publishers do not like broke fragments more or data that does not fit into themes, we cannot deny they are still there. Researchers who undertake a liquid stance toward data allow themselves to connect lines between points of information, findings, and themes. This is a step that moves beyond breaking down, reassembling, and describing information. It requires creativity, and that is a concept with which many researchers feel uncomfortable. Part of the discomfort seems to stem from a lack of a firm definition of knowledge, which has been defined in a host of ways (for example Gibbons et al, 1994; Barnett; 2004). Barnett argues for Mode 3 knowledge, whereby one recognizes that knowing is the position of realizing and producing epistemological gaps. Such knowing produces uncertainty because, 'No matter how creative and imaginative our knowledge designs it always eludes our epistemological attempts to capture it' (Barnett, 2004: 252). Understanding knowledge gaps in liquid ways is a step that recognizes that knowledge representation is a challenge. It requires that as researchers we come to understand coexisting and multiple worlds, and that we see and understand that others see our own world(s) as partial and situated differently.

Thus, the notion of liquid methodologies draws on the notion of 'the liquid' and suggest that engaging with a world of liquid uncertainties might bring to light new understandings in terms of new notions of methodology and methods, as well as different understandings of space and spatial practices, and a recognition that research spaces are increasingly hybridized, extended, and mixed. For example, the notion of viral methodologies is that instead of methodologies being strongly 'located' philosophically, there is a sense of looser coupling and a greater liquidity between methodologies, so that underlying theories are seen as mutable and liquid. The paper concludes by suggesting that research is a political act, a stance that should be embraced rather than ignored. Doing research is often seen as something straight forward that has little to do with identity or political stance. Research should be grounded not in just philosophical or theoretical terms but also in political context. Data interpretation is often undervalued and seen as a relatively straight forward process of putting the findings of the study together with excerpts from participants. Yet interpretation is political because it reflects the ways in which researchers have chosen to position people and their perspectives, and so it is suggested that questions need to be asked about how politics rupture data, stories, positioning and portrayal.