Thesis proposal

Visual social competence as a research subject of contemporary sociology

Introduction:

Despite about three decades of social scientific research into visual and digital media we still know little about the people's experiences while receiving visual data. As Helen Kennedy indicated: "Data gathered through sentiment analyses are believed to provide detailed information about something to which direct access did not previously exist: public opinion and feelings" (H. Kennedy, 2012, p. 436). This is an important research question given recent increase in the private, public and political "use" of visual data and digital tools.

One such gap is in the relative lack of empirical insight into the new media users emotions and visual literacy. At the same time the researchers agree that this is very new and important field to analyse. Why? Firstly, emotions are culturally specific and socially constructed "(...) and so (they) need to be understood as socially and culturally produced, not simply individual or psychological" (Yifeng Jiang, 2016. Available at: www.projects.nyujournalism.org/newsliteracy2017. Accessed: 22 March 2017). Secondly, data visualisations are not anymore of interest for a small group of experts. "The hundreds of courses, tutorials and easy-to-use tools already available on the Web are a clear testament to the rapid democratisation of the field so far reserved for the small group of analysts. If indeed the language of data is replacing natural language in the process of knowledge creation, people need to acquire certain data processing skills with which to form the foundations of a new literacy, just as more and more social groups before them learned to read and write, creating a modern society". (K. Piekarski, 2016, p. 39). Researchers agree that we cannot think anymore about digital media as a communication media only. We have also to consider the social and political consequences of data analytic and mining. "When every move we make online is tracked by privately owned corporations and the state, advertisements follow us around in material retail spaces, and even our sleep patterns become fodder for self-tracking, we cannot afford to limit our thinking about data analysis technologies by approaching them solely as communication media". (M. Andrejevic, A. Hearn, H. Kennedy, 2016, p. 380).

My project will focus on the problem of what competences does the user of new media need in order to understand the visual data in journalism; and is there any difference in these competences between adult and young users in Poland? My research will contribute to a growing field of visual sociology knowledge, building on existing research and adding to the innovative

work on visual literacy developed by sociologists such as Helen Kennedy, A. Gumkowska, P. Toczyski. In different ways such writers and researchers have sought to present a more accurate and grounded knowledge of visual literacy together with a critical investigation into digital media, which surround it. In theoretical terms visual literacy is recognised as "understanding how people perceive objects, interpret what they see, and what they learn from them" (J. Elkins, 2010, p. 217).

This kind of research often emphasises also the complex dilemmas involved in emotional responses to data visualisations and people's real experience while receiving visual data. "The important role that emotions played in participants' responses to data visualisations suggest that different approaches to statistical education might be needed to develop people's confidence in relating to data. The findings also have important implications for visualisation producers and the practice of making visualisations." (H. Kennedy, 2017. Available at: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/smi/latest-news/helen-kennedy-data-viz-1.543222. Accessed: 1 March 2017). Also, offered is an arguably more constructive approach to social relations suggesting that "visualisation of data is not only a method of the structuring of information but it affects citizen involvement in the current social and political problems, because it can direct attention to completely different aspects than these shown by mainstream media and journalism" (Piekarski, 2017, p. 12). In this way it could be that digital and visual competence have the potential to change social relations, and are therefore sociologically and politically significant. My study seeks to investigate the practice and processes of understanding the visual content in journalism. Information shown on the websites and described by the visual elements makes the information more meaningful and understandable. Visual journalism became a new strategy of explaining and presenting of information. It can create also much more transparency in public sphere. The digital evolution changes the work of journalists. „Digital journalism production is less a praxis of straightforward publishing and more a process of continuous development."(L. Jonak, R, Wloch, 2017, p. 14)

Research Questions:
In the light of the above discussion my work aims to contribute to the process of more accurately documenting what competences does the user of new media need in order to understand the visual data in journalism; specifically, is there any difference in these competences between adult and young users in Poland?

My research questions will be organised to investigate three main areas:
1. Visual literacy: What skills are needed in order to develop visualisation literacy? And is there any difference in the competences between young and adult users (case study of Poland).

2. Emotions: How is data visualisation in journalism being used to evoke emotional responses to data?

3. The experience of digital media users: What is that people really experience while receiving visual data? It is a question about the social possibility to take advantages of the access to visual data.

I decided to refer visual competency to the social uses of visuality. More than what people know about images or paintings and how they interpret them, I am interested in what they do with them, how they use them, how they integrate into their daily lives, and how they achieve different social benefits. I regard visual competence as a competence of visual practices rather than visual expertise. One of the ultimate goals of the project will be to identify and describe in more detail the various dimensions of these practices.

Methods:

Because insight into users emotions and visual literacy is limited my research will be inductive and interactive. It will consist predominantly of individual semi-structured interviews with experts who are preparing the visual content and with the users of new media. It will also involve more ethnographic methods, such as participant observation, informal group discussion and reflexive interviewing. An ethnographic approach offers particular opportunities to dive deeper into the problem and qualitative methods are better in understanding reasons, opinions and motivations (E. Babbie, 2005, p. 40).

My research will focus on the experiences and perceptions of experts who prepare visual content and youth and adult users of new media. My sample will include experts in different age and users of digital communication of two generations, young people and internet users ages 55+.

The indicator of visual competency will be for me the ability to express oneself, to find a language for speaking about images, the ability to communicate, and to share with others the experience of visualization.

I would like to collect the data in England and Poland (I prepare and work on some projects there which are using new media) and to combine my work on PhD thesis and social activity. I am sure that kind of action research will give better results.

Contributions:

Understanding how data visualisations operate within journalism will contribute to:

- establishing guidelines for good practice in new journalism;

- establishing guidelines for the development of visualisation literacy (what skills are needed for the development of visualisation literacy);

- understanding of the emotional impact of data visualisations;

- understanding how visualisations work in specific contexts;

- challenging misinformative visualisations.

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