Expert or Idiot? On False Dilemmas in Digital Media Research

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Recently, *Wired* published a portrait of Jonathan Albright, Director of the Digital Forensics Initiative at the Tow Center for Digital Journalism. It pictured Albright, a well-reputed communications scholar, as a new type of expert—as someone who would bombard journalists with "direct messages late in the night," while "chugging a bottle of Super Coffee […] to stay awake." This new kind of expert academic, the article proclaimed, acted as a "detective of digital misdeeds," working overnight from a windowless university basement in order to take on "the world's biggest platform before it's too late." Experts like him, *Wired* found, have "become an invaluable and inexhaustible resource for reporters trying to make sense of tech titans' tremendous and unchecked power. Not quite a journalist, not quite a coder, and certainly not your traditional social scientist, he's a potent blend of all three—a tireless internet sleuth with prestigious academic bona fides who can crack and crunch data and serve it up in scoops to the press" (Lapowsky 2018).

Wired's article may prompt us to question what it means and feels like for an academic to become this "potent blend" that "serves it up in scoops to the press." While many academics in the humanities and the social sciences aspire to take on a public role, *Wired*'s portrait inadvertently lends an air of precarity to the role of the digital sleuth. There is nothing particularly attractive in being unable to sleep because of failures in regulatory oversight.[1] Nor is it desirable per se to align the scholarly research process with investigative reporting or other forms of knowledge production conditioned on competitive, time-pressured marketplaces. One also may wonder about the knowledge thus produced, as it appears valued solely in terms of its usefulness to the press and its publics. And what about the foil against which the digital media expert is defined, here somewhat ominously referred to as "your traditional social scientist," someone *Wired*'s journalists are "certainly not" willing to talk or listen to? Why is not being able to code, to report, and to do proper social research a qualification for studying digital media, according to *Wired*?

The reason I asked myself these questions is a project I am currently co-leading, entitled *Shadow Economies of the Internet: An Ethnography of Click Farming* (2018-2020; funded by the Swedish Research Council). Our project came in response to a current sense of crisis evolving around notions of political disinformation, advertising fraud, and identity theft. Scoops in *New Republic* (Clark 2015)

and *The New York Times* (Confessore et. al. 2018) were quick to attribute these phenomena to a multi-billion dollar industry and the illicit inflation of social media currency, using an evocative imagery of offshore "follower factories" or "click farms," supposedly located in the Global South. In this powerful narrative, digital sweatshops in Indonesia and elsewhere form part in a global labour arrangement designed to serve consumer brands, top politicians, and entertainment celebrities of the Global North. Accordingly, low-skilled "clickworkers" program or manage large scales of automated accounts stolen from real users and operated via bots, on behalf of brands in the U.S. or Europe who reap off the benefits. We initially responded with skepticism to these reports, their scandalizing of the issue, and the dichotomies at the core of their narrative. My own contribution to this project developed as a study of digital cultural production that would look at networks and actors somewhat closer to home, and at the businesses that provide both the marketplace for such services and the venue to reap off their benefits, such as Google, Facebook, and PayPal.

Long before a first peer-reviewed research paper was published, public interest in the project took off. We were contacted by national and global news outlets. Colleagues at a renowned data analysis school proposed to collaborate and urged to "aim for quick publication and [to] think about a media strategy. We have contacts with *NYT*, *Guardian* and *Buzzfeed*." At this point, I had already started a collaboration with two senior editors at Vice in Berlin, feeling that I needed outside advice as being a detective was not part of my qualification as a humanities-trained media scholar. Friction soon developed within the project. My colleague, a social anthropologist, had conducted ethnographic interviews in Indonesia and raised doubts about my ethnographic input, given that I did not plan to conduct fieldwork on site in exotic foreign locales. Also, my work was going slow, and I had more questions than answers. The data school promised to speed and tool the project up, deliver more data, and package the findings in a way that would guarantee public impact. Although my collaboration with Vice had been motivated by my reluctance to act as a data analyst or public investigator, it suddenly appeared as if our project had transformed from two complementary research avenues into two competing media strategies. Was my teaming up with Vice in conflict with my colleague's intent to link up with the school and the media campaign it wooed us with? Hadn't we started this project by distancing us from scoops and the press in the first place? What had happened?

The figure of the expert may help explain some of the unanticipated dynamics in today's digital media research. In *Wired*'s view, interesting scholarship seems to consist of "cracking and crunching data," well in line with how *Wired*'s former editor Chris Anderson put it: "Out with every theory of human behavior, from linguistics to sociology. Forget taxonomy, ontology, and psychology. Who knows why people do what they do? The point is they do it, and we can track and measure it with unprecedented fidelity. With enough data, the numbers speak for themselves." (Anderson 2008) Of course, such statements primarily testify to the strategically disruptive "bullshit" Anderson (and *Wired*) are famous for.[2] Yet positioning scholars as mere intermediaries for processing data to be found in the world also represents a (ontological) claim about scholarship found elsewhere. It's a claim that has become commonplace since the 1990s Internet boom, when "knowledge" and "information" became interchangeable concepts, with knowledge positioned as a resource to be opened up for economic and other gains (Kocyba 2004). This is not to say that such knowledge would not be helpful in dealing with the many platform-related crises observed by the news media. For instance, a previous collaborative project I co-led employed an "interventionist" strategy of publicly experimenting around access to Spotify's otherwise inaccessible user data, in order to create attention around Spotify's intransparent collection and use of these data. (Eriksson et al. 2019; for project methods see also Rogers 2019). While we only performed as "experts" in the news after the project had been completed, our strategy paid off and led to Spotify being investigated by the Swedish Data Protection Authority (Datainspektionen 2019; see also Vonderau 2018).

Still, acting like an expert serving useful knowledge to the public is not necessarily a good *research*

strategy. In *Wired*'s version of things, media scholars need to vigorously attach themselves to the problems they are studying ("'No one cared about my work until it became political,' he [Albright] adds with a shrug" [Lapowsky 2018]). For me, it made more sense to study illicit online engagement based on a principle of detachment. A watershed moment that occurred in the research process in this respect for me was when both my colleague and I, in what I perceived as a friendly rivalry of topping each others' data, coincidentally discovered the same seemingly big actor in the middle of our investigations which geographically first had taken us to Indonesia and Germany, respectively. The Big Actor Find, as we might call it, related to over 1,000 smaller entities that apparently had grown into something larger: the main supplier of the Internet's "follower factories"? Invited by me to a joint workshop, a colleague from the data analysis school provided lists of more data and the prospect of stunning visualizations, as all the evidence now indeed appeared plainly visible. Rather than questioning the idea of "main supply"—somewhat at odds with the Internet's distributed network topologies—and in lieu of a theoretically informed approach or a properly developed argument, big data-made-visible quickly fitted a story already out there—exactly the one we initially had aimed to confront. We were close to becoming experts.

In context of a Big Actor Find, this seems all but inevitable. While small finds and micro-actors force us into developing elaborate arguments, Big Actor Finds seem to provoke the opposite. Yet what alternative is there to providing "data," given that everyone seems to vie for it? As philosopher Isabelle Stengers reminds us, another way of looking at the culture of expert knowledge is through the figure of the "idiot"—in the sense of a conceptual character that appears as antagonistic to what true experts embody (Stengers 2005). An idiot, according to Stengers:

> is the one who always slows the others down, who resists the consensual way in which the situation is presented and in which emergencies mobilize thought or action. This is not because the presentation would be false or because emergencies are believed to be lies, but because "there is something more important." Don't ask him why; the idiot will neither reply nor discuss the issue. The idiot is a presence or, as Whitehead would have put it, produces an interstice. There is no point in asking him "what is more important?", for "*he does not know.*" But his role is not to produce abysmal perplexity, not to create the famous Hegelian night, when every cow is black. We know, knowledge there is, but the idiot demands that we slow down, that we don't consider ourselves authorized to believe we possess the meaning of what we know. (Stengers 2005, 996)

Anthropologist Ignacio Farìas suggests to embrace this position as one that helps thinking through the timing of collaborative research processes, arguing that fields characterized by an "entanglement of humans and non-humans" would require a "slowing down of thinking and decision-making, the opening up of space-times for the cultivation of emergences and differences" (Farìas 2017, 36). So, in doing digital media research on contentious issues such as "fake likes," would we need to make a choice between acting as experts or idiots? Is this about attachment or detachment, crunching data and going public or, alternatively, remaining lost and lonely in a university basement?

The dilemma is obviously false, and partly imposed on the researcher, reminding us that empirical fields always are co-constituted in practice. Fields of inquiry emerge through interaction with actors within and outside these fields. A significant part of the scholarly discovery process consists in storytelling what we have found to our colleagues, informants, and ourselves. There thus is nothing wrong in either telling or not telling a story; it's more about how this telling implicates us in the organizing of the field and the actions we observe.[3] In my own area of research, Production Studies, or the study of media industrial practices, "having access, and informants, and backstory information on industry" is not necessarily seen as an advantage, because they "may by themselves position the industry scholar as a 'text' being written by the industry."[6] In a digital media context, not only may researchers be positioned through strategic leakages or the withholding of information that may be far more subtle than any power play in a traditional fieldwork situation; they also are obviously quickly induced to

let themselves literally be 'written' up by the industry, as the *Wired* example demonstrates. Unless it's part of a self-reflexive and critical strategy, sending messages to journalists at night or crunching data for them is hardly productive for research that studies digital cultural production, and the same goes for traditional ethnography. While all of us are experts in some way, being idiots often may help, too.

Notes

1. Albright (2019) himself seems to hint at this in his public Twitter feed where he notes of being "4-5 months behind on emails" and having trouble balancing "press/academic/leg inquiries" with research and administrative work, while lacking funding.
2. According to a data-driven sociological study, "pseudo-profound bullshit" is not only common, but popular (Pennycook et al. 2015). For a more substantial theoretical critique, see Geoffrey C. Bowker (2014).
3. In my work, I am following an STS-oriented approach in studying "action nets" and the way narratives form part in organizing (see Czarniawska 1997).
4. As John Caldwell observed fifteen years ago, "naïve ethnography" is as problematic as a "naïve textualism in accounting for cultures of media production." Not much has changed since then (2006, 115).

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