

WEB SOCIAL SCIENCE (Concepts, Data and Tools for social scientist in the digital age) by ROBERT ACKLAND

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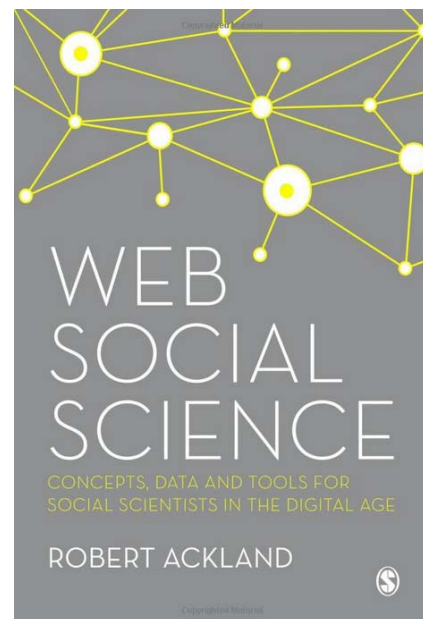
ABSTRACT

The goal of this book, as mentioned in the introductory part, is to provide a very usable instrument for everyone to understand the social, political and economical dimensions of the web and also their implications regarding the existence of the contemporary society. Following this goal, the book is structured into two main parts, the first concerned with presenting and describing the main methods used in social science when conducting research on the web, and the second provides examples of different aspects that can and should be investigated using the web by social scientists. The examples provided by Ackland in his book range from friendship formation to politics, government and commerce related aspects.

Key words: web, social media network, hyperlink, power law; Robert Ackland

The work entitled **Web Social Science** is the outcome of many years of research conducted by professor Ackland in web related fields. The fact that the paper is written in a facile language becomes one of the main strengths of this book.

Going further, even though, as I have already pointed, the language used makes the book very accessible it is also very effective in providing a very clear description of the different methods that one might use when conducting web based researches. Therefore the book should be regarded as a very useful tool that describes how the web should be used by social scientists in order to shed some light over a wide range of questions that are still under debate. Still, some could find the approach as being simplistic due to the fact that the author does not provide very thorough descriptions of all the mentioned (described) methods and aspects, but instead, he prefers to focus his attention in providing a complete framework of all sides, related with the web that might be of interest for social scientists.



One of the main strengths of the present paper is the abundance of the sources provided as bibliographic notes that will be considered by everybody deciding to extend his research into one particular aspect as very useful.

Further, in this paper, I will try to identify the strengths and also the weaknesses of the book written by professor Ackland, using an iterative approach based on the chapters of the paper.

In the Introduction professor Ackland tries to establish some basic concepts involving the virtual world developed on top of the Internet. As strength I have to mention the fact that his work provides a very facile description of the main concepts that should be familiar to any researcher that shows interest for the web.

The first part of the book is concerned with presenting and describing the main methods used in social science when conducting research on the web. The chapter "Online research methods" is very well structured and all types of researches, quantitative and qualitative, are presented, and therefore the constructed picture is complete. Although, I have mentioned in the beginning of my work, the book tries to be a very accessible tool for researchers, practitioners and students, some parts should have been presented using a more detailed approach. Also, noteworthy is the fact that professor Ackland identifies clearly the advantages and the limitations of these online research methods.

The description of the social media networks and of the hyperlink networks (the author proposes the social network analysis as the appropriate method to quantitatively study the social networks that have emerged using the web) provided in the second and third chapter are very well documented with examples that make all the presented concepts very easy to understand. The book touches some very hot topics of our days by presenting Facebook and Twitter as environments extremely suitable for the social researchers to conduct their studies. The presentation of the three web crawlers (IssueCrawler, SocSciBot, VOSON) is also notable and will definitely be of great help for fellow researchers that find themselves in need for gathering large amount of data from different web pages.

The second part of the book provides examples that describe how the web has influenced several economical and social phenomena and also how different aspects related to social sciences can and should be studied using the web (using the methods described in the first part of the book).

In this second part, the first topic that receives the attention of the author is the friendship formation process (in different web networks as Facebook, online dating sites, Twitter) and the concept of social influence. Very important to mention, regarding this chapter, is the detailed description of the significant potential of web data when studying these aspects of the social life. Further, the book provides valuable information about the collective behavior of organizations on the web. Also noteworthy in this chapter is the description of the way the web influences the human behavior when talking about collective social movements (rioting behavior).

The next chapter tries to provide a clear description of how politics has been influenced by the web which brought new and very useful tools for increasing the visibility of political parties and other actors. The introduction to power laws from this chapter is very useful in order to provide a better understanding of how different phenomena occur on the web. Still, a more detailed description of power laws could have been provided because such an undertaking would have facilitated the understanding of the differences occurred in different phenomena between the web and the real world.

The focus in the eighth chapter is mostly on the ways the web impacts the methods used by government to disseminate information and to yield authority and lets the study of the macroeconomics of virtual worlds in a second plan. Therefore, even though the first part is very well covered by the author I believe that the study of the microeconomics of virtual world should have received a higher attention because these types of worlds are becoming more and more important nowadays (and their impact on the real world has become significant).

In the ninth chapter the author provides a very detailed description of the way the development of the web has influenced the collaboration and production. This chapter exemplifies in a very straightforward manner the impact of the web on the "scholarly world"

by discussing the visibility of the scholarly outputs and the distribution of the scholarly authority in the new paradigm of a highly interconnected academic world.

The last chapter provides some very valuable insights about two very important phenomena that were enhanced by the web (commerce and marketing). A strong point of the book is the description of the main coordinates of the online commerce versus the real world commerce through the long tail concept and superstar concept (both based on the same power laws). Further, the implication of Facebook in particular and of the online friendship in general in the marketing activity (influence in markets) is largely presented in this chapter and therefore social scientists concerned with this domain might find this chapter very interesting and useful.

Before bringing this paper to an end I have to state that even though the book is mainly recommended for social scientists it might prove useful for engineers, mathematicians and statisticians who are studying how different parts of the web are built and are functioning and also the methodological mechanism behind different phenomena that occur on the web.

As a final remark I will list professor's Paul Vogt (from the Illinois State University, USA) words "Reading it taught me quite a lot about a subject I thought I knew rather well"