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Advances
in Quantitative Ethnography

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Preface

This volume contains the proceedings of the First International Conference on Quantitative Ethnography (ICQE). We have attempted to bring together scholars from a wide range of fields interested in the use of quantitative techniques to address issues more traditionally dealt with using qualitative methods. As the name suggests, we hope this event will be the first in a series of conferences—and in writing this preface as part of the final preparation for the meeting, the scope and quality of the work being presented at the conference suggests that this is a realistic ambition.

We had 53 paper submissions, which was more than we originally anticipated. Papers were reviewed using a double-blind review process, with two sub-reviews and one meta-reviewer from the conference's international Program Committee. The contributions were of high quality overall, and we accepted 23 as full papers and 9 as short papers for inclusion in these conference proceedings. The contributions come from a diverse range of fields and perspectives, including learning analytics, history, and systems engineering, all attempting to understand the breadth of human behavior using quantitative ethnographic approaches, which our colleague Ron Serlin has described as a "unified method" that integrates both qualitative and quantitative approaches to data and its analysis.

Although the papers collected here differ in their goals and domains of study, they represent the beginning of a rich conversation about research methods, tools, and the philosophical dilemmas of modeling human interaction. This is not coincidence. Fostering this dialog was the purpose of the conference and of these proceedings.

We believe the effort is both timely and essential, as we have seen a growing need for a professional and scientific discourse around the use of data to investigate human experience and culture with the advent of new kinds—and much larger quantities—of information about human activity in recent years.

Technological developments, from ubiquitous cell phones to cloud computing, have increased our ability to quantify aspects of human experience from health and culture to experience and consciousness—and this ability, in turn, has raised new possibilities and new concerns about how, whether, and why to use such tools.

The result has been opening of new branches and areas of research, such as learning analytics and digital humanities, but also changes in existing disciplines such as statistics, where the focus has shifted from answering simple questions by generalizing based on sparse amounts of data towards making sense of enormous amounts of data, thus allowing more complex inferences.

Our goal in starting a scientific dialogue around the concept of quantitative ethnography is to foster a community of researchers interested in sharing ideas, resources, and inspiration, hence we have also organized both the event and these proceedings so as to avoid creating intellectual silos by placing the different contributions into predefined categories of object or method. Our aim, rather, has been to maximize participants (and readers) opportunities to learn from each other—through

the papers collected here, and at the conference through paper presentations, symposia, and keynotes aimed at presenting, comparing, contrasting, and synthesizing current work and setting future directions for the community of scholars interested in quantitative ethnography.

We hope that future ICQE meetings will be the place for scholars to present their research, to learn and share new methodological techniques, and to develop a robust methodological and philosophical discourse exploring new analytic approaches based on big data which create new and fruitful intersections between classical ethnographic methodologies and modern statistical methods.

Both approaches share the challenge of creating meaning and understanding in the face of rapid, technologically-driven expansion in the amount and kind of data available to researchers. By unifying tools, techniques, and epistemologies from both traditions—and by developing new methods at their intersection—quantitative ethnography is an approach to data analysis designed to allow researchers to tell textured stories at scale.

We believe that this conference and these proceedings are an important first step in that direction.

September 2019   Morten Misfeldt
                                                                                                     Brendan Eagan

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