

Temporality and Truth in *Connected in Isolation*

KEVIN MUNGER

Pennsylvania State University, USA

The COVID-19 pandemic took everyone by surprise, but most of us were stunned into stillness and complacency longer than Eszter Hargittai and her research team. The most important and impressive aspect of *Connected in Isolation* (Hargittai, 2022) is the timing; there is so much knowledge here that would otherwise simply have been lost to history. This speaks to the importance of being prepared, so that when the world serves up events, researchers are in a position to study them.

I have seen this problem time and again in the context of social media trace data. Setting up keyword-based Twitter samples during the heyday of the API era, for example, meant always playing catch-up. Hargittai's survey-based approach represents a complementary method, one that is still constrained by the unidirectional nature of time but considerably more adaptive than coding-based sampling.

This focus on the human side of digital media is Hargittai's trademark, beginning with her now-canonical research on digital literacy conducted in person (Hargittai, 2002, 2005). The shift from this research modality to those possible during the pandemic might have posed issues, so I was heartened to see the following comment about the limitations of online surveys—a limitation that is a curious combination of sampling problem and survey modality:

In the context of discussing Internet skills, it is also worth remembering that participants in this study took the survey online and so are likely more digitally savvy than the average Internet user both with respect to general Internet skills as well as social media skills. Had the survey been administered in person (impossible during lockdowns) or on the phone, the mode of data collection may well have captured a more diverse group of users. As noted earlier, this means that any variations found in this sample are likely to be a conservative estimate of the amount of variation across the spectrum of digital inequality in an even more diverse sample. (Hargittai, 2022, p. 57)

This point is a more concise version of an argument I have been making around digital literacy and online surveys in a series of recent papers (Guess & Munger, 2023; Luca, Munger, Nagler, & Tucker, 2021; Munger, Gopal, Nagler, & Tucker, 2021). The standard methodological question of whether a given research method is "valid" is much too broad—no method can be *universally* valid, there are scope conditions to any such validity, and the current book is an excellent case study.

Another contribution—one which, entirely coincidentally, also benefits the relevance of my own research—is to highlight just how *essential* the Internet has become for the standard practice of a wide range of human behavior, economic, political, and social. Despite decades of Internet scholars arguing that this thing is a big deal, some scholars insist that it is distinct from (and, it is implied, less important than)

“real life.” The pandemic represented an acceleration of Internet penetration into every area of life; we should no longer take these objections seriously. This acceleration is also a perfect case study of the effects of a *shock* to Internet adoption and intensification, moderated by a host of micro- and macro-level variables.

With the importance of this topic firmly established, I turn to the meat of this article and the bugbear of all digital media research: *time*. The empirical analysis in this book took place in a unique period in modern history. Scholars still laboring under the burden of scientism might use this fact to discount the book’s findings: If science is about generalizability, what use are nonrepresentative or nonreplicable findings?

To Hargittai’s credit, she does not brush these issues under the rug or make some untenable claims about naive generalizability of these results. They are nonetheless valuable, on their own terms.

Indeed, my thinking around temporal validity suggests that the true value of Hargittai’s real-time historical approach cannot yet be fully appreciated. As long as social scientists continue to develop novel theories or extend existing ones, then there are by definition aspects of the data in *Connected in Isolation* (Hargittai, 2022) that we cannot yet appreciate. Although I cannot say more about what these might be, I want to highlight this latent value as part of the unique contribution of descriptive research more generally.

This comment on the experience of reading this book in the *present* and perhaps even in *the future* brings me to my critique, such as it is. This critique is less of the book than of the general process of doing social science on a rapidly changing topic, compounded by the exogenous shock of a world-historical crisis.

An innocuous example that stuck out to me was the conceptualization of the “next generation Internet user” (Hargittai, 2022, p. 50). Hargittai (2022) invokes the concept as developed by Dutton and Blank (2014) as “people who have three or more devices to go online, one of which is mobile” (p. 50). The logic of how this concept is related to the concept of a highly autonomous user (that is, one who is could at least potentially go online in a variety of ways and is more resilient to the disruption of any given pathway) makes sense. But the equation, presented in Table 2.1, that “Mobile + Tablet + Computer = High autonomy” is confusing to me (p. 53).

Perhaps I am simply being defensive, but I consider myself a high-autonomy Internet user despite never having owned a tablet. I do, however, own three laptops, in varying degrees of functionality. The definition dates back to 2014, when tablets (driven by the iPad) were exploding onto the scene. Over the past decade, in my reading of the evidence, tablets have settled into a more niche role than either personal computers or smartphones, primarily used for reading, watching video, or gaming.

This is a minor point in *Connected in Isolation*, and nothing of major import hinges on it. But it struck me as a useful inroad for discussing the more general issue of theoretical knowledge accumulation in this rapidly changing area. Are these still “next generation” users? Or do they belong to a “generation” (in Internet terms) that has already been superseded?

The more directly relevant instance of temporal instability comes from the questions about knowledge of “virus-related know-how” (Hargittai, 2022, p. 33). These initial surveys were conducted in

April and May 2020, the early days of the pandemic. It is made clear that “all questions concerned guidelines that the World Health Organization was providing at the time and had made available on its website” (Hargittai, 2022, p. 34).

However, the specific questions seem odd from the present temporal position, in 2023: “The risk-minimizing strategies included washing hands with soap . . . keeping a distance of 6 feet (2 meters) from other people . . . avoiding handshakes . . . not touching one’s eyes, nose, and mouth with one’s hands . . . cleaning and disinfecting frequently touched surfaces . . . and not leaving the home” (Hargittai, 2022, p. 35). We now know that *the majority* of these risk-minimizing strategies are not in fact particularly effective at combating the spread of COVID-19, which is an airborne disease.

There are no easy answers here; indeed, this contestation of expertise by a connected public is one of the most challenging issues facing liberal democracies in the digital age. But the statement, “While it may be that some of these avoidance strategies have since been contested, at the time of the survey, these were believed to be the safest approaches by experts” (Hargittai, 2022, p. 34), comes close to brushing this complex problem under the rug.

I would have liked to read a more direct engagement with the fact that some of these avoidance strategies have been not merely “contested” but actually are no longer endorsed. Similarly, although the text mentions that “the questions did not ask about masking as, at the time, there was no widespread consensus about that particular approach” (Hargittai, 2022, p. 36), it passes up an opportunity to discuss this absence from the expert advice in more detail.

As noted in the beginning of this article, we are only able to experience these temporal tensions because these surveys were deployed so quickly and so early on the pandemic. A less responsive project would have had more time to align itself with the eventual consensus and would be *less interesting* as a result.

More interesting still, though, might be an approach that equates knowledge of COVID not with “agreement with the expert consensus at the time” but rather with “factually correct beliefs about the world.” Science is by definition falsifiable, and no scientific consensus is inviolate; still, we tend to believe (with good reason) that experts following tightly controlled scientific procedures are our best bet for homing in on the truth.

“Do your own research” is not likely to go away, absent a fundamentally illiberal, technocratic restriction of Internet access. As Internet skills and autonomy of usage continue to proliferate, the distinction between genuine expert epistemic communities and competitor communities will be more difficult to maintain by fiat. Doing science, in real time, during a crisis, is extremely challenging—but we are better off when it is done and done well, as in the case of *Connected in Isolation* (Hargittai, 2022).

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