# ABSTRACT

## Title

Large numbers and many events: imitative fluxes and the social coding of quantity

## Background:

Social media platforms often account for their own value and importance using large numbers: e.g. Facebook - 1.2 billion; Twitter 645 million, LinkedIn 200 million. These numbers, whether they count users or postings are powerful. They attract investment, media attention and further users. In many respects, these numbers symbolise the social and economic power of social media. They also figure prominently in many accounts and reports concerning big data.

## Objective:

To offer an understanding of how large numbers attributed to social media take shape through a variety of processes of imitation.

## Methods:

The research reported here explores large numbers associated with the 'social coding' platform, Github.com. Drawing on recent anthropological and sociological work on numbering (Verran 2011) and digital traces (Latour et al. 2012), it does so in two ways:

1. It pays attention to the many data visualizations of Github as forms of social practices of showing large numbers. The data visualization of social media practices is part of the sense-making of social media, and patterns in the visualizations point to prevalent understandings of agency and value connected to these numbers. Particular attention will rest here on annual Github data visualization competitions.
2. It works directly with the event stream available from GithubArchive.org to develop alternative maps of accumulating events on Github that do not simply mirror the aggregate large numbers. In order to do this, it identifies several major forms of imitation that simultaneously occur on this social platform, and shows how they collectively generate large numbers. In doing this data analytic work, it suspends conventional assumptions about individual or group agency, and focuses solely on characterising imitative fluxes visible in the copying of names and the copying of code.

## Results:

This account of large numbers on social media platforms has several implications. Large numbers lead increasingly complex cultural and social lives. Most big data analytics of social media do not focus on the constitution of the effect of size. While making use of 'big data' infrastructures such as BigQuery, the results presented here do not separate the data from the platform. Rather, they show how social media platforms (in this case Github), with all its ongoing changes, as deeply invested in the production of the numbers that summarise entangled social practices as data. It is possible to disaggregate large numbers, and thereby gain some insight into the social-technical processes that give rise to them. In order to do this, however, we need to diverge from many existing accounts of social media focused on user behaviours, social network dynamics or social physics (Pentland 2014). We need to attend an entangled set of imitative processes moving across and working at different scales of agency.

## Future Work:

Latour, Bruno, Pablo Jensen, Tomasso Venturini, S. Grauwin, and D. Boullier. 2012. “The Whole Is Always Smaller Than Its Parts. How Digital Navigation May Modify Social Theory.” *British Journal of Sociology* 63 (4): 590–615.

Pentland, Alex. 2014. *Social Physics: How Good Ideas Spread—The Lessons from a New Science*. New York: Penguin Press HC, The.

Verran, Helen. 2011. “The Changing Lives of Measures and Values: From Centre Stage in the Fading ‘Disciplinary’ Society to Pervasive Background Instrument in the Emergent ‘Control’ Society.” *The Sociological Review* 59: 60–72. doi:[10.1111/j.1467-954X.2012.02059.x](http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2012.02059.x).