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# It's a trap!

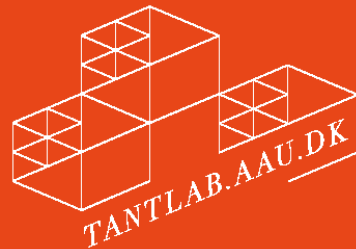
Three current pitfalls for the the  
'softer' side of computational SSH

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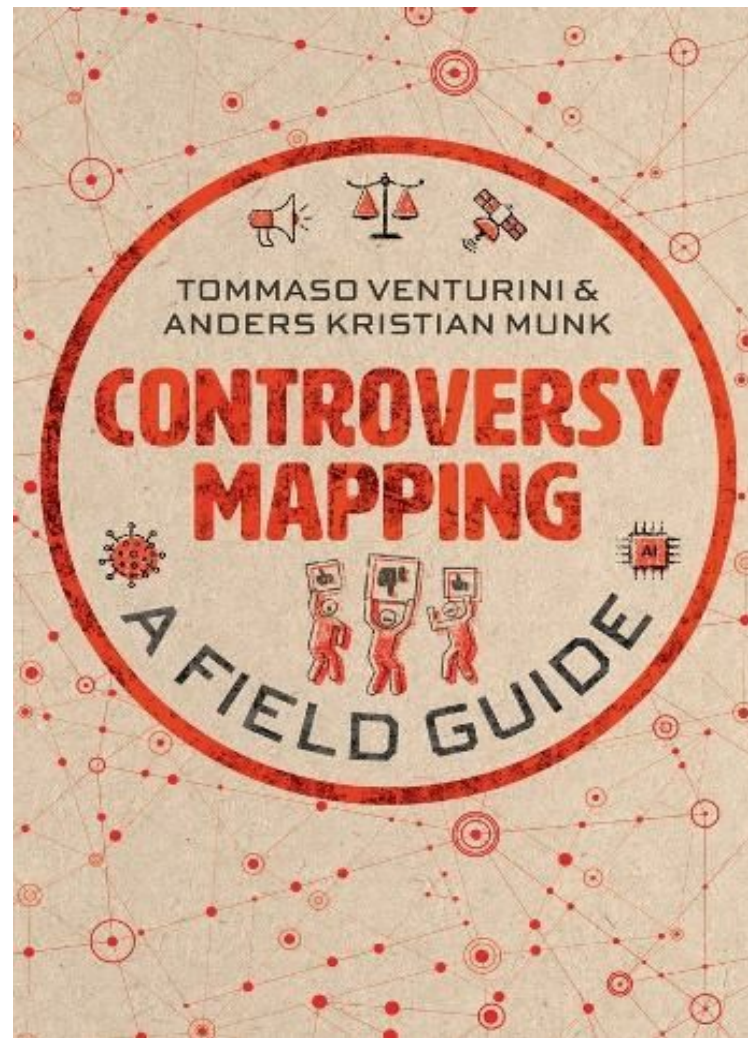


Andreas Birckbak og Anders Kristian Munk

# Digitale metoder



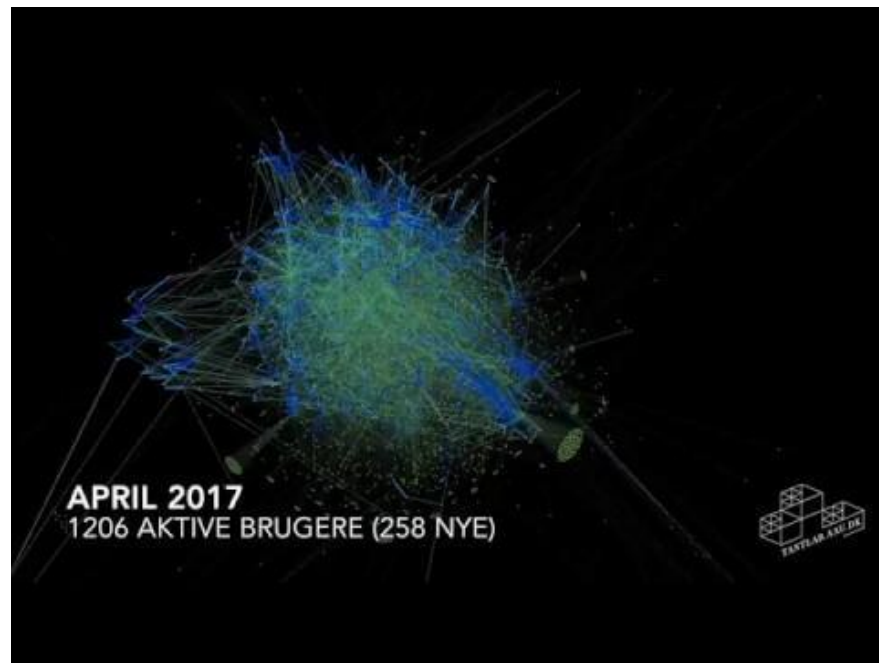
Hans Reitzels Forlag





2.2 Issue map cropped from the pages of the National Flood Forum using IssueCrawler (07.01.2008). Top 50 nodes displayed.

2007



2017



*"You need to get your fingers stuck in the minced meat if you are going to make meatballs"*

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# I have (at least) three problems...

...that I keep bumping up  
against when I try to get my  
hands dirty with the digital  
minced meat...

...namely our tendencies to  
self-evidently equate...

1. ...computational methods with  
quantitativist ambitions
  2. ...critique of computational  
practices with safe distance  
from those practices
  3. ...SSH uptake of computational  
methods with user-friendliness  
and support
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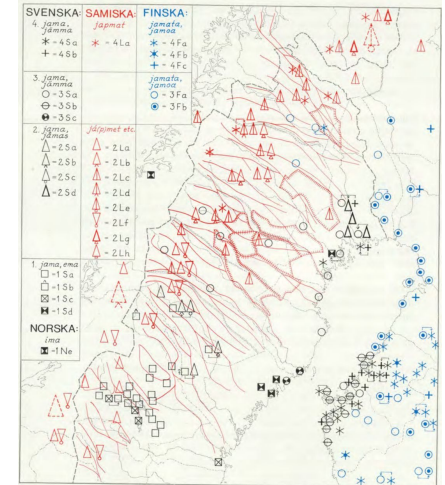
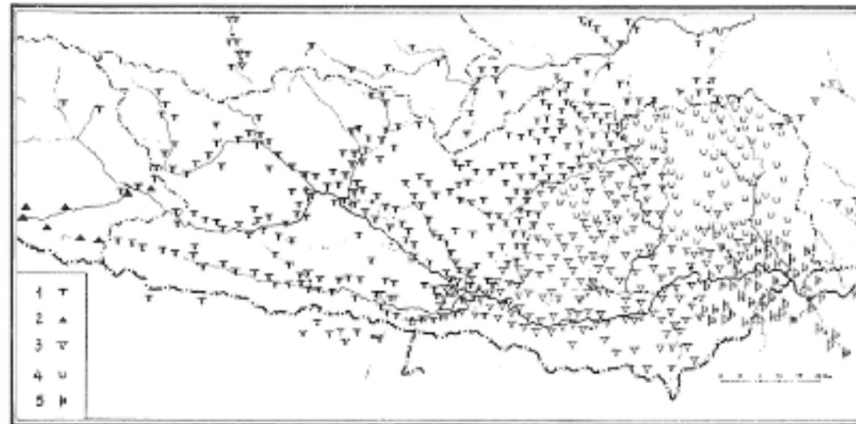
**Stop equating  
computational methods with  
quantitativist ambitions**

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# Computational methods ≠ quantitativist ambitions

Munk, A. K., & Jensen, T. E.  
(2015). *Revisiting the histories  
of mapping*. *Ethnologia  
Europaea*, 44(2), 31.

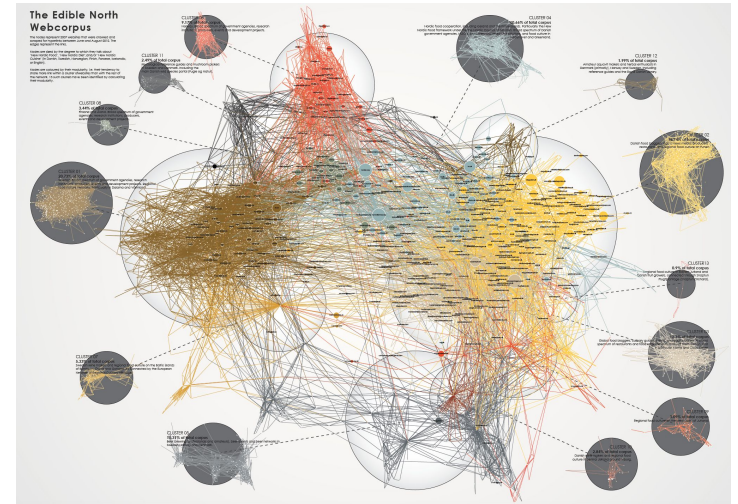
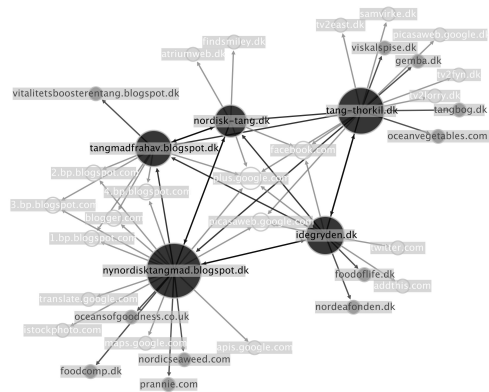
Long humanistic tradition for data intensive research practices where the aim has not been to explain or predict, but to describe, explore, and pose better questions. E.g. the historical geographical paradigm in ethnology.



*Munk, A. K. (2019). Four styles of  
quali-quantitative analysis:  
Making sense of the new Nordic  
food movement on the web.  
Nordicom Review, 40(s1), 159-176*

## Computational methods ≠ quantitativist ambitions

In order to be useful in SSH research, many datafication processes require qualitative curation, which in turn requires in-depth understanding of specific digital settings.

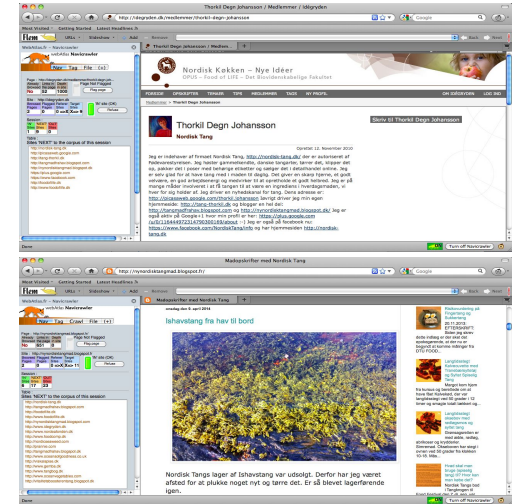
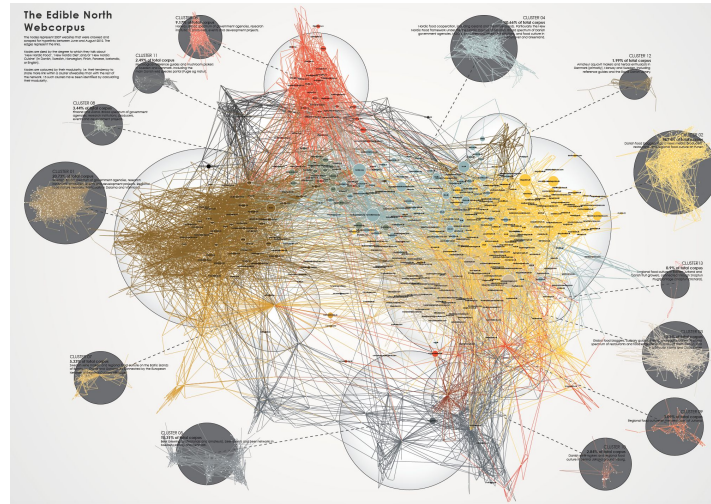




# Computational methods $\neq$ quantitativist ambitions

*Munk, A. K. (2019). Four styles of  
quali-quantitative analysis:  
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Nordicom Review, 40(s1), 159-176*

Much of the data that is increasingly becoming 'computable' is essentially qualitative material, which can retain its richness and remain the subject of qualitative questions.

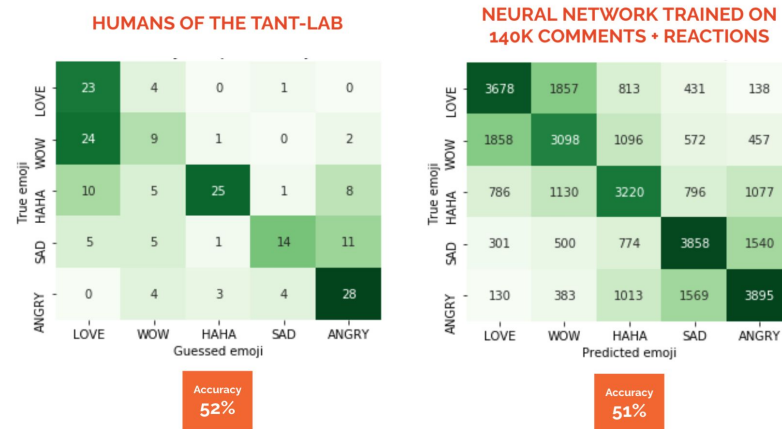


# Computational methods $\neq$ quantitativist ambitions

Munk, A. K., Knudsen, A.G. & Jacomy, M. (forthcoming). **The Thick Machine: An experiment in computational thick description.**

Working paper submitted for special issue on "Computational Anthropology".

You might even argue that the current generation of machine learning algorithms, with all their explainability challenges, resemble more to qualitative than to conventional quantitative modes of reasoning.



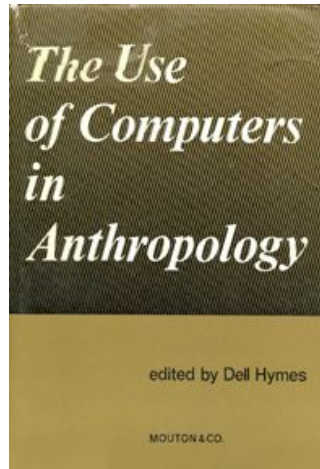
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## Computational methods ≠ quantitativist ambitions

Munk, A. K., Knudsen, A.G. & Jacomy, M. (forthcoming). **The Thick Machine: An experiment in computational thick description.**

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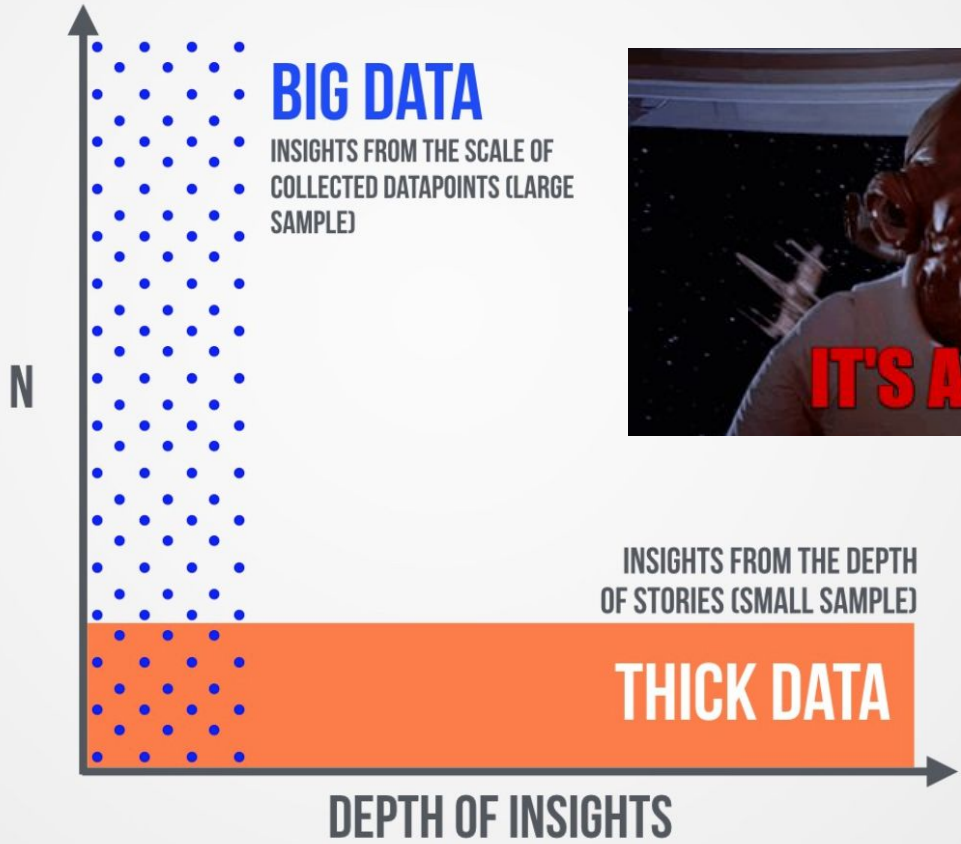
But there are deep-seated historical reasons why many predominantly qualitative SSH disciplines, such as anthropology, tend to associate computational methods squarely with formalist/positivist/nomothetic rather than interpretative/hermeneutic/idiographic approaches.



*"[Ethnoscience] holds that culture is composed of psychological structures by means of which individuals or groups of individuals guide their behavior. (...) And from this view of what culture is follows a view, equally assured, of what describing it is--the writing out of systematic rules, **an ethnographic algorithm**, which, if followed, would make it possible so to operate, to pass (physical appearance aside) for a native." (Geertz, 1973:11)*

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# TO FORM A COMPLETE PICTURE, BOTH BIG AND THICK DATA ARE CRITICAL BECAUSE THEY PRODUCE DIFFERENT TYPES OF INSIGHTS AT VARYING SCALES AND DEPTHS



Wang, T. (2013): 'Why Big Data Needs Thick Data'

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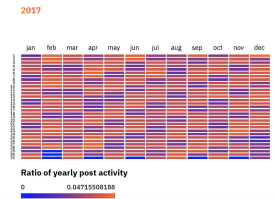
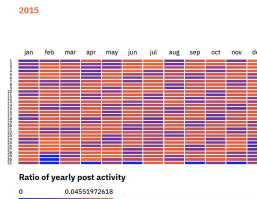
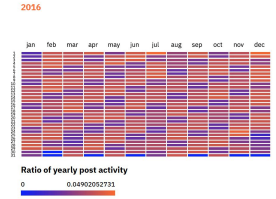
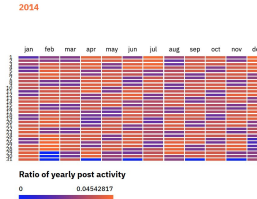
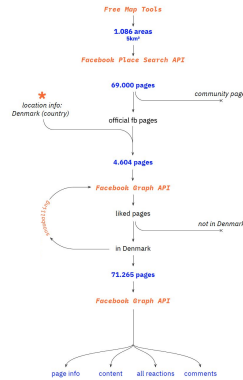
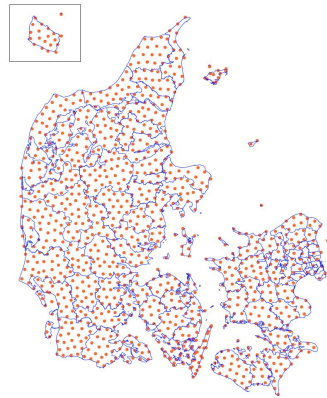
**Stop equating critique of  
computational practices  
with safe distance from  
those practices**

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# Critique ≠ distance

*Munk, A. K., & Olesen, A. G. (2020).  
Beyond Issue Publics?: Curating a  
Corpus of Generic Danish Debate  
in the Dying Days of the Facebook  
API. STS Encounters-DASTS  
working paper series, 11(1).*

Being close with computational practices is a great way to become critically aware of their possibilities and limitations, and thus slow down reasoning in the way they are appropriated for research (what Rogers (2018) calls “critical analytics”).



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## Critique ≠ distance

*Jensen, T. E., Birkbak, A., Madsen, A. K., & Munk, A. K. (2021). **Participatory Data Design: Acting in a digital world.** In *Making and Doing STS*. MIT Press.*

Proximity to practices of datafication, analysis and visualization is also a way to empower engaged publics / stakeholders / users by giving them the possibility to scrutinize socio-technical black boxes and possibly redesign them (what Latour (2005) calls “critical proximity”).

*Madsen, A. K., & Munk, A. K. (2019). **Experiments with a data-public: Moving digital methods into critical proximity with political practice.** *Big Data & Society*, 6(1)*



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**Stop equating SSH uptake of  
computational methods with  
user-friendliness and support**

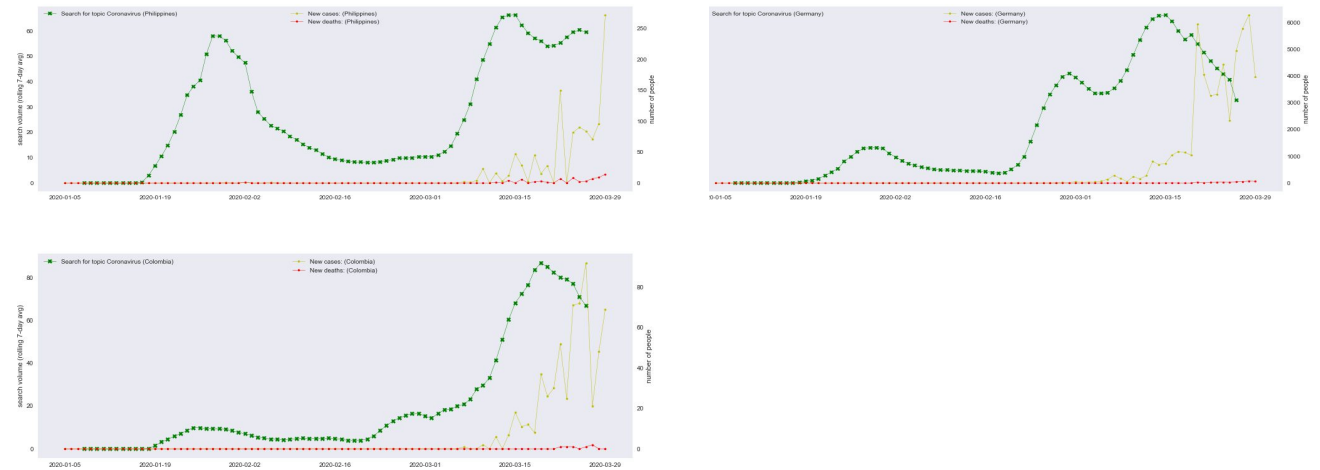
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# SSH uptake $\neq$ user-friendliness and support

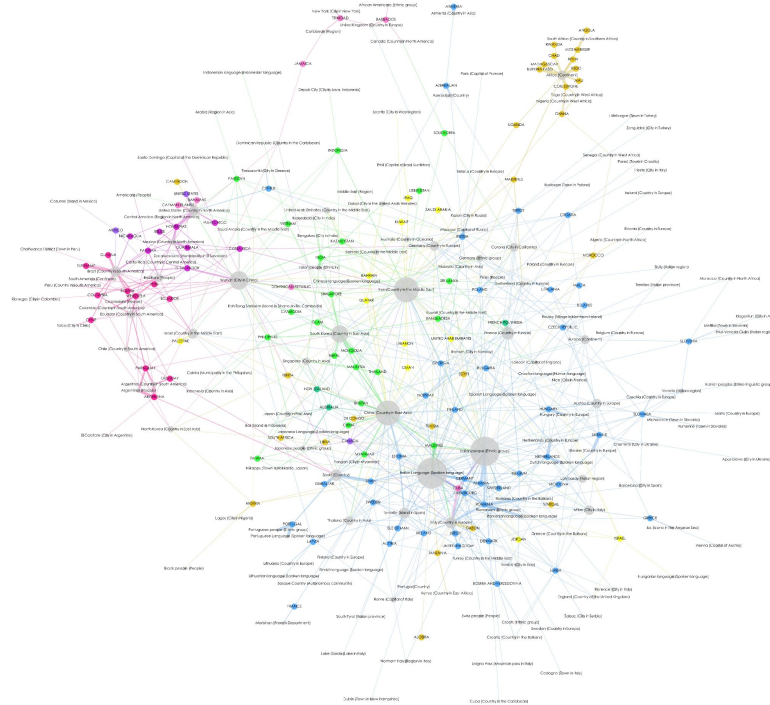
*Munk, A. K. (2020). **Internettet, infodemien og den sagsorienterede offentlighed.** In "Det Epidemiske Samfund". Hans Reitzels Forlag.*

The issue with tools in general, and easy-to-use-tools in particular, is their tendency to prescribe certain forms of analysis. Research design becomes a matter of which buttons can be pushed rather than vice-versa.

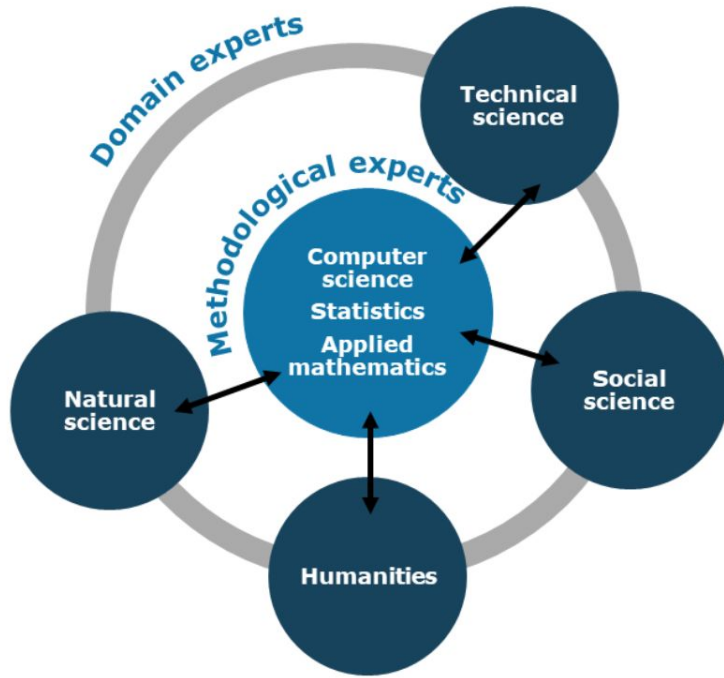


# SSH uptake $\neq$ user-friendliness and support

*Munk, A. K. (2020). Internettet, infodemien og den sagsorienterede offentlighed. In "Det Epidemiske Samfund". Hans Reitzels Forlag.*



In reality, these scripted solutions often mask a wealth of technical possibilities that are available 'under the hood' and therefore also a range of potential research designs.



institution. One should be a methodological expert from computer science, statistics or applied mathematics and the other a domain expert from a field of application that may be broadly chosen (not medicine and clinical research).

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# It's a trap!

Three current pitfalls for the the  
'softer' side of computational SSH

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