Special Section: Data Power

Introduction

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From the internet of things to smart cities and from surveillance to global finance, data shape our lives. As information is generated, collected, and analyzed through the apps we use, in ways that are both obvious and imperceptible, black-boxed algorithms and opaque systems are used to profile and sort us, direct our spending and travel, and monitor our actions.

How can we reclaim some form of data-based power and autonomy and advance data-based technological citizenship while living in regimes of data power? Is it possible to regain agency and mobilize data for the common good? Which theories help to interrogate and make sense of the operations of data power? What kind of design frameworks are needed to build and deploy data-based technologies with values and ethics that are equitable and fair? How can big data be mobilized to improve how we live, beyond notions of efficiency and innovation?

Consisting of five articles, “Data Power – One” focuses on these critical questions and reflects on the social and cultural consequences of data becoming increasingly pervasive in our lives. These articles are a selection of research presented at the June 2017 Data Power conference held at Carleton University in Ottawa. This first collection of articles discuss issues of data power in the Global South, offer case studies about data and marginalized communities, report on data activism, and examine data infrastructures and power.

Monika Halkort launches the section with “Decolonizing Data Relations: On the Moral Economy of Data-Sharing in Palestinian Refugee Camps,” which interrogates the critical intersection of measurement, datafication, and value extraction in humanitarian settings. Building on decolonial theory and post-humanist perspectives, Halkort offers a critical rereading of moral economy as a historically situated transversal practice. She explores how the non-linear transition of lived and embodied knowledge into and out of data (re)configures the calculus of reciprocity, justice, and fairness in the colonial struggle of Palestinians.

In “Welfare Fraud 2.0? Using Big Data to Surveil, Stigmatize, and Criminalize the Poor,” Kathy Dobson examines the discourse around the digital surveillance of those living on social assistance by analyzing two digital “anti-fraud” tracking tools: Ontario’s

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Social Assistance Management System (SAMS) and the BasicsCard system in Australia. Dobson observes that these digital tools adversely affect the people they are supposed to help and, worse, stigmatize and criminalize those who live in poverty.

Carlos Barreneche, in “Data Corruption: The Institutional Cultures of Data Collection—the Case of a Crime-Mapping System in Latin America,” analyzes the Bogotá, Columbia, Vigilancia Comunitaria por Cuadrantes crime-mapping system, which is intended to improve the planning of police services. But as the system was also used to assess the performance of the police, deliberate miscoding, deterrence tactics to prevent citizens from reporting crimes, and disruptions to the flow of data ensued, meaning the system lead to practices of data corruption and corrupt data.

In “‘Hacking in’ Wikipedia Zero in Angola,” Sophie Toupin examines a case study in Angola where a number of people were banned from editing Wikipedia Zero as they were concealing large files in the Wikimedia feature. Proposing the concept of “hacking in” as part of an open media and technological infrastructure, Toupin argues that media infrastructures are shaped by their users as well as their designers.

This section closes with “Classification as Catachresis: Double Binds of Representing Difference with Semiotic Infrastructure” by Lindsay Poirier. It examines debates over best practices in semiotic infrastructure design and discusses political and pragmatic considerations that impact what is represented in an information system and how. Poirier suggests that all databased representations are forms of data power and that examining semiotic infrastructure design provides insight into how culturally informed conceptions of difference structure how we access knowledge about our social and material worlds.

Together, these five articles analyze and examine the implications, biases, risks, and inequalities, as well as the counter-potential, of data practices and systems in various contexts. Subsequently, they reveal that these systems and practices are filled with promises, contradictions, and contestation. These articles also generate insights into how technological and societal practices are deeply embedded in and shaped by existing structures of power and extreme inequality. They highlight the pressing need for critical analyses of data practices that are cognizant of power relations, biases, and inequalities. Data Power – Two will be featured in a future issue of the Canadian Journal of Communication.

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Note

1. The first conference was held in 2015 in Sheffield, United Kingdom, and was hosted by its founders Helen Kennedy, Jo Bates, and Ysabel Gerrard. The 2019 Data Power conference, which focuses on global in/securities, will be held in September of 2019 and will be hosted by ZeMKI, Centre for Media, Communication and Information Research at the University of Bremen (Germany), in cooperation with Carleton University (Canada) and the University of Sheffield (U.K.).