Book reviews


Reviewed by Arne Hintz
Cardiff University

With the increasing integration of digital tools, sensors and platforms in all aspects of everyday life, the term ‘big data’ has become both a key resource and a buzzword in political, economic and scientific discourses. Businesses apply data analytics to production and transaction processes; our mobile phones track our every move; every Facebook post creates not just a message but a wealth of metadata; ‘smart homes’ operate appliances and monitor inhabitants; and from our body functions to what we ‘like’, our self is datafied. The conditions for how data is produced, managed, analysed and utilised have changed dramatically. As the volume of data increases exponentially, so does its value for businesses and administrations.

While an understanding of the changing role and characteristics of data should be essential for most areas of academia, scholars of critical approaches to the social sciences and humanities have shown a particular interest in investigating the drivers, interests and implications of data production and data sharing. Questions are increasingly asked about the limitations of a datafied world and the role of the citizen as participant and contributor, as well as an object of control. Two recent books offer particularly useful discussions of these issues: Rob Kitchin’s monograph *The Data Revolution* and the co-edited volume *Compromised Data* by Langlois, Redden and Elmer.

Kitchin provides an informative introduction to the changing role of data and an overview of key trajectories of the big data debate. By referring to a wealth of practical examples and reviewing a broad range of academic work, he explains the contexts, uses, motivations and implications of the ‘data revolution’. *The Data Revolution* traces the emergence of big data, from historic forms of representation to the more recent growth of computational power, the expansion of data storage, the networking of devices and the digital mediation of everyday life. From a critical perspective, the author helps us understand the nature of data. He explains convincingly that data should not be regarded as a neutral and objective representation of the world, instead being economically, ethically, politically and socially constructed. Data, as Kitchin notes, are always dependent on the ideas, instruments and knowledges used to generate and analyse them. Human expertise, judgement, choice and constraints are necessarily reproduced in the data we collect. This has implications for the political and economic uses of data, but also for data science. Kitchin recognises the contributions of the digital humanities and data-based social sciences, but urges scholars not to forget that data collection and design are necessarily contingent on human values, objectives and decisions.

As an overview of the debate, the book balances beneficial and empowering uses of data with ethical, political and social concerns. Opportunities of data collection and availability, as discussed
in the book, include the opening up of publicly held data and enhanced efficiency in service provision. On the other hand, the vast increase in data trails and digital footprints is used for surveillance, and results in serious challenges to people’s privacy. Predictive profiling and social sorting of citizens – both by state institutions and businesses – may increase discrimination, particularly as algorithms may have in-built biases according to factors such as ethnicity and gender. Data breaches, as Kitchin notes, continue to be common and data collected about citizens are rarely safe from intrusion. The author discusses several drivers of data discourses, including the state and its interest in monitoring citizens, and he explores current dynamics in the activities of data brokers and data markets.

The Data Revolution offers a fairly concise overview of relevant aspects of the data debate. Inevitably, a number of the themes discussed here deserve further elaboration. From a critical media scholar’s perspective, we may be interested in a more thorough discussion of the implications of social media, the political economy of data and the possibilities for activism and data alternatives. This is what the co-edited volume Compromised Data provides. Langlois, Redden and Elmer have assembled an international group of authors from different disciplines encompassing cultural studies, journalism, internet studies, philosophy and technology to address how our social life is transformed into data. Some of the questions posed by the edited volume are: Can the richness and complexity of ‘the social’ be translated into data, and what is lost in the process? What aspects become relevant, and which are ignored? Who decides and whose interests define what is collected and analysed? From a range of angles, the authors investigate how the social is transformed and, as they argue, compromised, and explore the social and political implications.

At the centre of this argument lies the rise of social media, and thus of repositories of social life that transform the social into searchable, mineable and profitable databases. As ‘strategies to get users to produce data’, social media platforms construct a new form of the ‘social’ that grows from data collection and management, focuses on relations between data and leads, essentially, to the profiling of populations. More explicitly than Kitchin, many of the authors criticise the private ownership of data and its use for control purposes. They thereby situate what they call ‘big social data’ in the context of neoliberal redefinitions of the role of the state and the transformation of citizenship into consumer practices. By distancing themselves from enthusiastic claims of big data and automated decision-making as a solution to social problems, they focus their analysis on the social and political contexts within which data processes are designed and developed.

The big data paradigm and its marketisation and control logics, according to the editors, limit and constrain what can be known and how that knowledge is applied. The authors demonstrate this limitation through a variety of case studies, from petition platforms to governance and research. Rather than enhancing opportunities for democratic engagement and participation, they claim that current data practices lead to new forms of alienation and, ultimately, resignation due to the opacity of data collection and analysis. As a result of this dire analysis, the authors then explore possible alternatives to current data practices. They ask whether data can be reappropriated for different uses and purposes, but also whether data needs to be re-thought. What new research designs would affect the compromises made in the capturing of big social data? What new research ethics are necessary? How can data activism overcome the fallacies of the big data paradigm? What are the prospects for deconstructing and redefining the concept of data? By pointing to a range of alternative data practices, the book aims to transform ‘data analytics from a control mechanism to a critical process of social transformation’.

Data collection and analysis are at the core of current social developments, and a critical understanding of these processes is essential for media and communication scholars. The Data Revolution and Compromised Data provide excellent overviews of key debates and help us acknowledge the implications of a datafied world.