

Tracing Capitalism’s Turn to Data: Or, Contextualizing Daily Life’s New Data “Context”

Commentary

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This short response to the articles in this Special Section foregrounds the wider context of data traces in the development of capitalism. After analyzing the issue’s articles into three categories (dealing with epistemology, agency, and social consequences), the response argues that the biggest context of all to datafication is the current transformation of capitalism under which the production of value is focused on the extraction of value from data. What drives this? What implications does this have for the social domain and the micro-contexts of our practices with data? These are the larger issues toward which the articles in this Special Section all point.

Keywords: capitalism, datafication, context, epistemology, agency, ontology

This short commentary is not the place to pretend to offer a synoptic response to the 13 rich articles that make up this Special Section. Such an attempt would, in any case, be inappropriate because the articles face in at least three directions, as I read them. Some—those by Grenz and Kirschner; Hogan; Plantin; Rieder and Gerlitz; Rogers; Van Norden et al.; and Walter et al.—address the broad epistemological issues raised by the increasing centrality of data generated by social media platforms in interpretations of “the social” (and the political): For this group, the key term is *traces*, but traces of what, exactly? (I will return to that.) The second group—Gerhard and Hepp; Hand and Gorea; Kneidinger-Müller; Lupton et al.; and Milan—addresses the new forms of agency around data collection and their interpretation by movements and individuals as a cultural and social phenomenon: For this group, the key term is *context*. A third set of articles—by Grenz and Kirschner; Manovich; and Plantin—overlapping in part with the first, considers what the broader digital (or should we say *datafied*?) transformation of media means for society, social knowledge, culture, and, implicitly, the economy. Clearly, these different orientations among the articles cannot be resolved neatly into a single focus or set of common questions: Indeed, their differences illustrate the complexity of the new force field in which digital research is now implicated.

Instead, here, I want to offer—via a lateral reading of the articles—a broader framing of what is at stake in these different terrains, drawing out something that, I suggest, is understated across all three

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groups of articles: the shaping power of capitalism. The “turn to data,” which has transformed the social sciences, is not a phenomenon of the social sciences—it is rather a local application of a transformation affecting all business, politics, and social life, a change in how value is created and how the world appears and is known to us. There is, as Lev Manovich notes, something larger going on beyond social media platforms and their data properties. This is an additional meaning to the notion of “digital traces” that provides the title of this Special Section and is the focus of the guest editors’ introduction (Hepp, Breiter, & Friemel).

Let me start with the epistemological problem. Social and political science is increasingly treating the data collected on social platforms as a resource for analysis. But, as Richard Rogers insists, there are issues with treating “vanity data” as direct traces of the social process, without reference to the motivated performances such data might represent. In response, Rogers offers an approach of “critical analytics” that seeks to abstract from vanity metrics what analysts care more about—that is, enduring patterns of concern, commitment, alignment, and so on. This is an important advance. But its step forward relies on moving one step back from the general space of the platform’s social interaction to consider the “professional work” within a distinct “issue space” where actors have a position and seek to influence the positions of others. And there remains the question of how the patterns that are reliably extracted from critical analytics can then be mapped onto non-platform data, for example, geographical location. As Rogers notes, although geocoordinates “often accompany digital media,” they may not in others, creating a new sampling issue, which Walter et al. also note in their article.

Underlying the epistemological issue raised by digital traces is a deeper ontological question about what and where social process is now in a world where platform data, with their known alignments, form such a large part of the social world’s surface appearance (Couldry & Kallinikos, 2017). As Bernie Hogan notes in his article, a shadow falls over the analysis of social life through platform data when platforms increasingly use their power to give or refuse data to researchers and companies through APIs, acting in the platforms’ interests, not those of wider industry or academic knowledge production. Yet such is the naturalizing force of platforms’ role in social knowledge, that there is almost no public interest in this spoiling of the well. It remains to be seen whether current debates about fake news and the like will stimulate a wider reaction that might draw attention to these deep-seated epistemological questions.

All of the above problems illustrate a wider issue with social knowledge in the age when privately owned and managed “platforms” are increasingly providers of something close to an infrastructure for what we know of the world and how we navigate through it. Jean-Christophe Plantin’s article foregrounds this broader issue via a consideration of Google Maps, sharpening the paradox between the genuine increase in participatory opportunities in knowledge production and the equally real increase in centralized control that is the basis for that participation having a reliable common reference point at all. The latter feature is perhaps unsurprising because it is inherent to all infrastructure; it is only the existence of new possibilities of participating in infrastructure that is historically surprising. But the contradiction is no less forceful for all that, because of the long associations of the Internet with discourses of freedom. Crucial in Plantin’s article is how he contextualizes epistemological—indeed, ontological—issues in the wider dynamics of economic power and, even more broadly, the wider splintering of infrastructural supports for everyday life in highly unequal societies.

Rieder and Gerlitz provide an interesting twist on Plantin's paradox by explaining how, for Twitter, at least, platform "power" is the result of a variety of platform-client relations, which determine the data uses that clients can make of the platform and so are able to seek to influence public debate. The authors show convincingly how the resulting platform power is a distributed accomplishment with automated dynamics that need to be understood in their variability, not just in their overall features. What is left open in their article is how we relate this complexity back to the wider commercial pressures that shape all productions of what Rieder (2016), drawing elsewhere on Desrosières, calls "accounting realism." Grenz and Kirschner provide different but equally fascinating insight into the complex forces that underlie the users' apparently seamless interface with apps and platforms, analyzing the still unresolved fate of Apple's use of UDID (unique device identifiers) to harvest data from its devices for specialist business use. Building on their example of a complex tussle between Apple and external developers (the "iPhone Dev Team") and a lone hacker, they argue that platform dynamics are best understood as an open-ended cultural struggle between actors that requires "interpretive tracing" rather than power analysis. We reach here, I suggest, the limits of hermeneutic interpretation—unless we can find a way of registering in our interpretation the force of Apple's overall huge economic power as the world's largest company by stock market valuation. Is there really, as they suggest, a reciprocity of perspectives in such negotiations of the sort that Anselm Straus saw in daily interactions between individuals? At the very least, Grenz and Kirschner's approach would seem to be in tension with Plantin's broader argument about infrastructural contradictions.

These unresolved questions about how to integrate political economy understanding with an appreciation of the local complexity of platform production and platform interaction is a distinctive feature of social science today as it relies ever more heavily on platform social data. I will return to the broader implications of this shortly. An alternative response is to bracket this difficulty and focus on the new forms of agency arising in and around digital platforms. Von Nordheim et al. do so by asking if a platform such as Twitter shapes the flow of public debate in ways that are distinctive of social media platforms compared with mainstream media.

A more frequent form of this turn to agency in this Special Section is to consider individual or group agency.

Stefania Milan offers a rich phenomenological account of how social movements' reflexive engagement with the production of data about their actions and communications might impinge on their awareness of their identity and their possibilities for transforming the world in new ways. It is beyond doubt that if platform-generated data composes a major new domain of knowledge and interaction (indeed, a new subject for the sociological study of action; Couldry, Fotopoulou, & Dickens, 2016), then we must investigate closely the "meaning work" that this involves for individual actors. Relations to media interfaces have always been an aspect of how social movements mediate their existence by attempting to historicize events as they unfold: Previously, it was the press and television; now, it is Twitter and Facebook. If so, then the question returns of how exactly we understand today's balance between decentralizing and recentralizing pressures—just the paradox that Plantin raises.

The same paradox lies in the background of these articles that consider, from various points of view, self-trackers who seek to gather quantified data about themselves and their bodies. Each article (by Gerhard & Hepp; Hand & Gorea; Kneidinger-Müller; and Lupton et al.) quite reasonably seeks, in various ways, to provide context for the practice of self-tracking. It is unsurprising that the personal and social context for the (until a decade ago) "strange" act of continuously measuring one's body and its performance is rich and complex. Whereas Kneidinger-Müller focuses on the general methodological principles, Lupton et al. emphasize the complexity of users' sensory and affective relations to the process of self-tracking. Hand and Gorea offer an illuminating discussion of the temporal aspects of self-tracking as a process, whereas Gerhard and Hepp prioritize the social networks and societal discourses at work in the meaning that self-tracking has for individuals.

However, at the edge of each of these accounts hovers the question of power and control: Are we to assume that questions about the platforms' or device producers' uses of the data generated are considered irrelevant by users? Or perhaps the product of a satisfactory trade-off? And how do we, as analysts, connect to the wider context of self-tracking emerging at a particular historical moment, when global business discourse is encouraging a broader shift by everyone toward a default setting that permits continuous data collection from our devices: "shift the collective mind-set about patient data to 'share, with protections,' rather than 'protect' . . . data sharing could be made the default" (Groves, Kayyali, Knott, & Van Kuiken, 2013, p. 13)? The nearest that this wider power question comes to emerging is in Hand and Gorea's double negative: "This is *not* to suggest that institutional extraction and aggregation will *not* have considerable effects on individuals" (emphasis added). What consequence would it have to foreground this power issue more positively in these studies? Indeed, if we take seriously individuals' practice of "reimagining the present" (Hand & Gorea, quoting Ruckenstein), should we also not take seriously corporate players' ability to reimagine the present and future, but on a larger scale that assumes the societywide normalization of their products and platforms in everyday life?

At this point, we need to return to the wider question of context that, for me, at least, remains rather muted through much of this Special Section—that is, the context that political economy provides for the epistemological challenges and the new forms of agency surrounding digital traces that are this Special Section's focus. It would be odd to assume that capitalism was entirely separate from, or uninterested in, the large-scale transformation of social knowledge and self-knowledge in which digital traces play a key role. Defining this "interest" of capitalism is what I personally am working on right now (Couldry & Mejias, forthcoming). It certainly far exceeds a "social discourse" or a transformation of "social expectations," the two broadest types of context that Gerhard and Hepp discuss. It is, however, hard to get into focus if it limits our understanding of capitalism's workings to a series of effectively cultural or technical negotiations, platform by platform. Capitalism, at least in Marx's version of social theory, is a social system for the production of value that depends on the deep and consistent transformation of practice everywhere.

It is here that Manovich's analysis in his article seems particularly interesting. Without explicitly naming the context as capitalism, he argues that datafication is part of a large-scale transformation of "media" (so that media become based in the "automated computational analysis of content") and of "culture." Manovich is surely right in pointing to a scale of transformation that goes far beyond the actions

of individual users: As he writes, "only if we consider the two parts of media analytics together—analysis of user interaction data and analysis of media content—the magnitude of the shift that gradually took place between 1995 and 2010 becomes fully apparent."

The question then becomes, what drives this wider change? Manovich's answer is the overwhelming practical necessity of dealing with the vastness of contemporary media and culture. But culture and media (if we include within them media audiences' uses and reception of media) have been vast for a very long time, perhaps always.

Today's sense of vastness derives from a radically new connective infrastructure for registering the myriad points of that vastness in a space of interconnection and potential behavior modulation.

The largest contextual question, therefore, becomes what drives that space of interconnection—its construction, its systems, and the continuing contests over who or what governs it. Recent legal and social theory has begun to suggest some answers (Cohen, 2017; Zuboff, 2015). No doubt more answers will emerge in the coming years. This, I suggest, is the larger context that we must uncover in studying digital traces: the context in which such traces come to have value at all, for whom, and for what wider purpose.

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