The Datafied Society

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Foreword

Over the past few years, many books have heralded a ‘data revolution’ that will change the way we live, work, think and make money (Kitchin 2014; Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier 2013). Datafication – transforming all things under the sun into a data format and thus quantifying them – is at the heart of the networked world. Data are also at the centre of our media practices: data feed the many applications we use on a variety of platforms, they flow from users and devices to services and platforms, making connections and scaling audiences at an unprecedented rate. Networked connectivity runs on data – the new oil of the information economy. Just as electricity changed industrial processes and domestic practices in the nineteenth century, a data-driven paradigm will constitute the core of twenty-first-century processes and practices.

It is therefore no surprise that data have moved to the centre of media research and have become protagonists in media narratives. Some scholars have heralded Big Data as the engine of unprecedented technological and social progress; for others, this framing marks yet another myth in the history of media technologies. In a society where many aspects of language, discourse and culture have been datafied, it is imperative to scrutinize the conditions and contexts from which they emanate. Researchers from the humanities and social sciences increasingly realize they have to valorise data originating from Web platforms, devices and repositories as significant cultural research objects. Data have become ontological and epistemological objects of research – manifestations of social interaction and cultural production. The Datafied Society: Studying Culture through Data approaches datafication as a process of mediatisation, and provides a theoretical and methodological toolkit for those wanting to study culture through data.

In developing new research skills, academics not only expand their own corpora of research objects; they also significantly change – and boost – their own role in society. As data are increasingly considered to be at the heart of the knowledge economies, data-savvy scholars from the humanities and arts (often in collaboration with information and computer scientists) have ignited critical public debates. Their perspectives on data science are important in that they bring the question of responsibility to the fore. Questions of responsible data production and use, but also questions of meaning attribution, ethics, privacy, data power and transparency of data handling now constitute the core of this new paradigm. As much as scholars need to tackle the challenges for research ethics standards when working with
big data, they also need to critically revisit their own position as experts who can influence public debates, policymaking and commercial activities.

For humanities scholars and students, the transformation towards a datafied society means they have to be able to deploy new research skills and methods that come along with this paradigm shift. Significantly, students need to be educated to become critical data practitioners who are both capable of working with data and of critically questioning the big myths that frame the datafied society. It also means they have to leave the academic ivory tower and enter the new world of ‘data practices’ to witness how they transform institutions, shape business models, and lead to new forms of governance or civic participation.

*The Datafied Society: Studying Culture through Data* provides students from the humanities in general (and media studies in particular) with a comprehensive overview of data practices relevant to media researchers. The book contains a broad overview of methods available, most prominently so-called Cultural Analytics and digital methods. A number of well-respected contributors show how specific social interactions and cultural practices in a data-fuelled society can be thoroughly studied and analysed, not only by exploring new analytical tools but also by critically assessing the various approaches, encouraging readers to develop a balanced understanding of how the datafied society works and how it can be looked upon from different angles. Several engaging case studies show the rich potential of what the analysis of data practices has to offer to media studies scholars. In the best tradition of this young field, critical reflection goes hand in hand with exploring new theoretical venues.

As our world gets increasingly connected and mediatised, input and expertise from the humanities and social sciences becomes essential to understanding the dynamics, ethics and pragmatics of a datafied society. This book is an important contribution towards meeting the challenges of the platform-driven, data-fuelled world in which we have all come to live.

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