The Datafied Society

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There is a plethora of publications emerging in the humanities, especially media studies, that use data points from social media platforms in order to investigate social interaction and cultural production. Data points taken from social media platforms are used for calculating metrics on the most diverse aspects of users and use. As Carolin Gerlitz has pointed out, research practices tend to treat these data points alike in spite of the fact that they take on different functions (Gerlitz & Rieder 2013) and even though they are used by different social groups (Bruns & Stieglitz 2013). Drawing on Espeland & Stevens (1998), Gerlitz calls this the commensuration of data points and formulates a data point critique.

What does your criticism of making data points countable and comparable for analysis consist of exactly?

Digital media are informed by standardization. What users can do in social media or platforms is usually prestructured into specific forms or – to quote that Agre (1994) – grammars of action. Friending, following, liking, commenting, sharing or favoriting allows users to act in prestructured form in the front end whilst at the same time producing equally prestructured data points in the back end. Action and capture are collapsed and happen simultaneously. A proliferating array of counters, tickers and notifications interfaces between action and capture, presenting users with aggregate counts of grammars performed through like or share counters, numbers of comments and other metrics. Whilst some platforms offer a rather limited set of grammars, like Instagram or Twitter, platforms like Facebook constantly proliferate their grammars. But what is it that we are counting when aggregating tweets, likes or comments? The combination of standardized action and countability is rather suggestive, both to media users and researchers, as it implies that the actions that grammars capture are similar if not comparable. But that is not necessarily the case. First, because users have different reasons to like, share or retweet and deploy the ‘interpretative flexibility’ (Van Dijck 2012) of platform grammars by assigning different meanings to them. Secondly, these grammars are increasingly being realized outside of the platform through social media clients, cross-platform syndication, automating software, apps and/or custom scripts (Gerlitz & Rieder 2015), which allow the grammars
of one platform to be folded into the grammars of other platforms – whilst not necessarily following the same objective or interpretation. Hashtags deployed on Instagram are easily transposed to Twitter through cross-syndication, just as tweets can be automatically created from news articles or RSS-feeds, just to name a few examples. The data points of one platform are thus informed by the interpretations, grammars and politics of a multiplicity of third parties. Espeland and Stevens understand such ‘transformation of different qualities into a common metric’ (1998: 314) as commensuration. Grammatisation of action and the possibility to build on top of platforms through apps, clients and syndication facilitate the commensuration of heterogeneous actions into a single data point. Rather than treating the data points provided by platforms as unproblematic and straightforwardly countable first order metrics (Callon 2005), I suggest to treat them as already assembled second order metrics, which are composed of heterogeneous interpretations, practices and actors. In order to work with social media data, researchers need to understand what they are counting in the first place, before reassembling data points into new metrics.

**How can we avoid the commensuration of data points? And what do you mean by treating data points as ‘lively metrics’?**

Commensuration cannot be avoided; it is a central element of the politics of platforms which provide infrastructures that cater to a variety of actors and their different objectives. These infrastructures facilitate the relative openness of grammars, as well as the possibility to retrieve and input data from and to the platform through application programming interfaces (APIs) which can be enacted by users and third parties. Commensuration is thus not only enacted by the platform itself, but has to be understood as a distributed accomplishment – or a happening (Lury & Wakeford 2012) – which needs to be realized by multiple actors in local, distributed and specific ways. Thinking of commensuration as happening does not reduce it to a mere effect of the medium or of grammatisation, but takes the various infrastructures, actors, practices and meanings into account that can feed into data points. As the happening of commensuration can play out differently at different times, with different issues, actors and practices involved, I suggest we think of social media metrics as ‘lively metrics’ which are animated by specific and local dynamics of commensuration. I understand lively in the sense of Marres & Weltevrede (2013) as internally dynamic, animated and variable, pointing to the multiple ways of being on platforms (Gerlitz & Rieder 2015).
Why do you call for a public debate on data points?

There is a delicate relationship between counting and valuation. ‘What counts’, Alain Badiou argues ‘in the sense of what is valued – is that which is counted. Conversely, everything that can be numbered must be valued’ (2008: 1). Within social media research, data points are being valued in regards to the stories they tell, the practices they explicate and the medium-specific dynamics they point to. Before reaggregating platform data into new second order metrics, it is important to understand what is being counted in the first places, as 100k tweets have a different value in research if issued from political protesters, cross-syndicated from Instagram or issued by spam-bot networks. The fact that numbers are easy to be displaced, circulated and reaggregated has led to their constant re-evaluation by a multiplicity of actors, reassembling them for intelligence, indicators for engagement, issue detectors or influence rankings (Gerlitz & Lury 2014), to name only a few. Once reassembled into new second order metrics, the question of what the original data points are composed of descends into the background. However, ‘commensuration changes the terms of what can be talked about, how we value, and how we treat what we value. It is symbolic, inherently interpretive, deeply political, and too important to be left implicit’ (Espaland & Stevens). As soon as social media data points come to have effects by determining the value or creditworthiness of consumers, or becoming part of governmental intelligence, it is important not to take initial data points as a given, but to understand what they are animated by. Therefore, a critical engagement with social media data needs to unpack and denaturalize especially those data points that appear most naturalized and straightforwardly countable. Their similarity is not a property but an accomplishment and there is a need for public debate on what is rendered equivalent and feeds into public forms of valuation here.

References


