Editorial: Against Subject Datafication through Anti-Oppressive Data Practices

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To study the myriad of data we produce, researchers not only require digital methods (Rogers, 2013) or new computational methods (Manovich, 2020). Nor is it enough to employ new analytical tools (van Dijck, 2017) and new conceptual frameworks that allow us to approach data from a critical perspective (van Es & Schäfer, 2017). What we need, first of all, is to rethink our role in society (van Dijck, 2017, p. 11). The latter is critical, because we may be witnessing (and provoking) the emergence of a new regime of power-knowledge (Leurs, 2017). Or, we may not be facing "a whole new regime of knowledge but new opportunities for extending, distorting, and modifying long-standing tendencies for how we use numbers and machines to make sense of our worlds" (Hong, 2020, p. 3). However, as happens every time there is a change of regime, what is at stake is to settle what counts as knowledge, who produces it, and what political exigencies shape what we take as an 'objective fact' (Hong, 2020). In the end, what is at stake is who exercises power over whom.

Everything indicates that the processes and practices of the 21st century will be increasingly grounded in a data-driven paradigm (van Dijck, 2017, p. 11) and that the results we obtain from our relentless effort to tabulate social dynamics as information (Leurs & Shepherd, 2017) will significantly determine the course of our societies. In this context, data appear as the 'purifying agent', the ingredient that would allow us to access, at last, knowledge freed from human bias and subjective opinions, tracing a clear and rational path on which to move forward (see Hong, 2020, p. 19). But all this is nothing more than a fantasy (Hong, 2020). What is certain is that data are human productions. As we know, "data is no thing-in-itself that exists prior to observation but something to be 'achieved' through a concerted process of production that can never rid itself of human subjectivity and sensibility" (Hong, 2020, pp. 19-20). Data, and especially datasets, are never innocent (Leurs, 2017), they are 'cooked' (Bridges, 2021; D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020), they are cultural artifacts, constructs "that emerge from always already power-laden semiotic systems" (Poirier, 2021, p. 2).

Indeed, as the authors who contribute to shaping this issue demonstrate, "data-driven knowledge production practices are inherently subjective, power-ridden and context-specific and, above all, only produce partial truths" (Leurs, 2017, p. 133). So much so, that "the power and privilege that contributed to their making may be [even] obscuring the truth" (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020, p. 153).

Data do not pre-exist, they are not neutral: they must be imagined (Bridges, 2021). They are never complete or self-explanatory (Leurs, 2017). On the contrary, they depend on "the social, cultural, historical, institutional, and material conditions under which that knowledge was produced" (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020, p. 152).

Far from offering "a raw and untampered representation of empirical reality, on which basis human bodies and social problems might also be cleansed of complexity and uncertainty" (see Hong, 2020, p. 8), data are weapons in a "rhetorical and ideological struggle to fix and assign meaning" (Bridges, 2021, p. 3). Far from realizing its fantasies of technoscientific objectivity and illusions of epistemic purity (Hong, 2020, p. 8), datafication is but a new chapter in the "histories of naming and categorization that have long been entangled in histories of sovereignty, colonialism, subjugation, and exploitation" (Bridges, 2021, p. 2).

The truth is that beyond the myths surrounding it, the technology that allows us to process big data arises in the military-industrial context to reinforce asymmetrical power structures (Leurs & Shepherd, 2017), for which it has been able to install intelligent systems for 'data driven truth making' (see Hong, 2020, p. 8), concealing that these same data lend themselves to political abuse and are prone to protect the interests of the powerful (Bridges, 2021, p. 2).

Imposing their own rules about what counts as a grounding for knowledge, information technologies seek to entrench a kind of rationality that pursues its own economic and technical priorities (Hong, 2020, p. 11), harnessing to its advantage "that modern drive to order the world as a taxonomy of facts for a sense of legitimacy and plausibility" (Hong, 2020, p. 16). Thus, emerges a 'doctrine of objectivity' (Leurs & Shepherd, 2017) that has no other purpose than to maintain asymmetrical power structures; a doctrine that, as Haraway explains, is "honed to perfection in the history of science tied to militarism, capitalism, colonialism, and male supremacy" (as cited in Leurs & Shepherd, 2017, p. 227). The threads of this story would weave their climax into what Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren Klein, interviewed in this issue, call *Big Dick Data*, an explicit academic term that alludes to

> data projects that are characterized by masculinist, totalizing fantasies of world domination as enacted through data capture and analysis. Big Dick Data projects ignore context, fetishize size, and inflate their technical and scientific capabilities. (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020, p. 151)

Algorithms, machine-driven databases, predictive and automated analytics, technologies for tracking and optimizing daily life, technological factmaking, etc., are the latest links in a long chain of domination that has been normalizing modern attitudes toward numbers and statistics in terms of various political exigencies (Hong, 2020, p. 4). This chain, which we began to forge during the Enlightenment,

when we put the concepts of 'objectivity' and 'neutrality' on the table (Brown & Strega, 2015), is solidifying as our reliance on quantification, the hallmark of its episteme (Leurs & Shepherd, 2017, p. 224), grows. But this "cultural desire for sorting the world into stable and discrete pieces" (Hong, 2020, p. 21) is just that, a desire, a longing rooted in a modern, masculine, liberal subject that for centuries has been making itself through "exterior processes of naming and categorization" (Bridges, 2021, p. 3). Rearticulated, today this subject becomes a 'datafied individual' (Leurs & Shepherd, 2017) "who learn[s] to privilege machinic sensibility above human experience" and bases his decisions on data (Hong, 2020, p. 7). Blindly trusting in this episteme —a mixture of positivist and transcendental empiricism (Leurs, 2017, p. 133)—, his faith in technoscientific objectivity offers him a refuge from the messiness of social problems (Hong, 2020, p. 10).

But this refuge is, in fact, a prison for most people. Why? Because "despite their conceit to objectivity, data-based calculations reinforce inequalities specific to historical conjuncture" (Leurs & Shepherd, 2017, p. 220) and caught up people "in programmes of social sorting, carried out by computational algorithms, particularly as they occupy marginalized positions within regimes of power-knowledge" (Leurs & Shepherd, 2017, p. 212). As Virginia Eubanks points out, our world is plenty of 'informational sentinels', invisible and inscrutable pieces of code that watch and analyze us (2017). As we know, "In a very real sense, data have been used as a weapon by those in power to consolidate their control" (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020, p. 14), just as "governments and corporations have long employed data and statistics as management techniques to preserve an unequal status quo" (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020, p. 17). Deeply embedded in the colonial legacy of surveillance, the datafied individual is a military-industrial invention, the "means of achieving the dual purpose of value extraction and social control" (Leurs & Shepherd, 2017, p. 222).

Hence, several authors call for the use of intersectional feminist (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020; Eubanks, 2011) or postcolonial feminist (Leurs, 2017) frameworks, methods, and ethical principles in order to question, precisely, the dynamics of power, oppression, and domination inherent to the infrastructures and processes that produce data. And not only to question them but also, as D'Ignazio and Klein point out, to take a stand against the status quo and change the distribution of power, that is, to subvert the "configuration of structural privilege and structural oppression" (2020, p. 24). This power-knowledge connection calls "researchers to consider how their deployments of big data, even from critical perspectives, may serve to replicate structures of discrimination by denying less 'data-ready' ways of knowing" (Leurs & Shepherd, 2017, p. 213).

In this context, it is critical to ask ourselves what goal data science prioritizes, who it benefits, and who it harms (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020, p. 26):

"Who exactly benefits from a shift toward correlative data analysis techniques in an age of big data? And by corollary, who suffers?" (Leurs & Shepherd, 2017, p. 211).

To address these fundamental questions, as well as others that arise in collecting, manipulating, and interpreting datasets, feminist approaches insist that we must connect our data to the context in which they are produced to better understand their functional limitations "and any associated ethical obligations, as well as how the power and privilege that contributed to their making may be obscuring the truth" (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020, pp. 152-153). Second, such approaches call us to recognize the contingencies of digital method techniques and to question their epistemologies so that we can "produce more robust and meaningful stories rather than universal truths or disembodied generalisations" (Leurs, 2017, p. 133).

Koen Leurs and Tamara Shepherd emphasize that the path to producing these stories involves "helping data subjects regain sovereignty over knowledge production," for which we must "make data mining a people-centred process," taking "seriously the agency of individuals over their own information" (2017, p. 225). Achieving this, which is obvious to researchers who work by putting social justice at the center of their practices and consider discussions about representation, collaboration, and the voice of research 'subjects' to be of vital importance (Brown & Strega, 2015), requires data researchers to prioritize listening, relationality, fluidity, mutual trust, dynamism, complexity, reflexivity, diversity, and multiplicity (Leurs & Shepherd, 2017, p. 225). This is the only way to strategically mobilize data as an "anti-oppressive knowledge-power system" (Leurs & Shepherd, 2017, p. 227).

Let us finish by extensively recalling what it means to be an anti-oppressive researcher for Karen Potts and Leslie Brown, as stated in the inspiring chapter they wrote for *Research as Resistance*:

> Being an anti-oppressive researcher means that there is political purpose and action to your research work. (…) by choosing to be an anti-oppressive researcher, one is making an explicit, personal commitment to social justice. Anti-oppressive research involves making explicit the political practices of creating knowledge. It means making a commitment to the people you are working with personally and professionally in order to mutually foster conditions for social justice and research. It is about paying attention to, and shifting, how power relations work in and through the processes of doing research. (2015, p. 255)

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