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Published in: Mediaciones

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):

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Citizens’ Media Meets Big Data: The Emergence of Data Activism

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“We are living in a time in which we are surrounded by data. Governments around the world are opening up their data vaults, allowing anybody access to it,” explained Simon Rogers, editor of the Guardian Data blog. We indeed live in a time of data abundance. Vast data sets are continuously generated and automatically stored by a variety of technologies such as aerial sensors, ubiquitous mobile devices, and radio-frequency identification readers. As we move in cyberspace, our activities leave behind digital traces of our doings, in a myriad of software logs and communications metadata collected by service providers. The ability of generating and making sense of ever-larger quantities of data has prompted observers to speak of a new breakthrough phase in human history, which Hellerstein (2008) termed the “industrial revolution of data”.

Although analysts in fields as diverse as meteorology, finance and genetics have always faced the challenge of making sense of large data sets, the unparalleled scale of the information generated today poses brand-new challenges to a variety of professions dealing with information. Journalism, as one of the key media for activism and social change. In what follows, we present the socio-political and economic context in which data activism emerges, and offer a preliminary definition of data activism. We then ground the concept on a multi-disciplinary literature review that places it in the socio-political and economic context in which data activism emerges, and offer a tentative agenda for the study of the phenomenon.

Data activism indicates social practices that take a critical approach to big data. Examples include the collective mapping and geo-referencing of the messages of victims of natural disasters in order to facilitate disaster relief operations, or the elaboration of open government data for advocacy and campaigning. But data activism also embraces tactics of resistance to massive data collection by private companies and governments, such as the encryption of private communication, or obfuscation tactics that put sand into the data collection machine.

Data activism is a theoretical construct grounded on empirical observations. We propose it as a heuristic tool useful to explore how people engage politically with big data and massive data collection. In this theoretical paper, we explore the potential use of data, data-based narratives, and data crunching software as tools for activism and social change. In what follows, we present the socio-political and economic context in which data activism emerges, and offer a preliminary definition of data activism. We then ground the concept on a multi-disciplinary literature review that places it in context and explores some of its facets. Finally, we offer a revised definition of data activism, and provide a tentative agenda for the study of the phenomenon.

Setting the Scene: Informational States and Computational Politics

Since 2012, the non-profit media organization WikiLeaks has released millions of classified documents, including US diplomatic cables and field reports from the Afghan and Iraqi wars (c.f. Brevini et al., 2013). Similarly, the top-secret information that whistle-blower Edwards J. Snowden, a former US intelligence contractor, offered to media outlets, has exposed blanket data collection strategies by Western national security agencies. More often than not, the disclosure of critical information spurred public outrage and forced authorities to react. The Snowden revelations, for example, mobilized heads of state and were discussed at the United Nations’ General Assembly. The WikiLeaks cable leaks, too, had social consequences, to the point that they are considered the catalyst of, for instance, the 2010-2011 Tunisian uprising. Some claim that “We might also count Tunisia as the first time that WikiLeaks pushed people over the brink” (Dickinson, 2011).

As the WikiLeaks case shows, the growth in magnitude and complexity of information has changed the nature of the nation state as well as its relation with citizens. Governments “deleteriously, explicitly, and consistently control information creation, processing, flows, and use to exercise power” (Braman, 2009). The state has become “informational”: in other words, it is characterised by “shifts in the nature of power and its exercise via information policy” (Braman, 2009). But there is more. According to Tufekci, digital technologies “have given rise to a new combination of big data and computational practices which allow for massive, latent data collection and sophisticated computational modelling, increasing the capacity of those with resources and access to use these tools to carry out highly effective, opaque and unaccountable campaigns of persuasion and social engineering in political, civic and commercial spheres” (Tufekci, 2014). The expansion of such “computational politics” is intimately linked to “the rise of big data, the shift away from demographics to individualised targeting, the opacity and power of computational modelling, the use of persuasive behavioural science, digital media ena-
Defining Data Activism

Data activism emerges in the fringes of society, in the realm typically associated with grassroots activism and civic engagement. However, it is rapidly evolving from a peripheral, elitist form of activism to a diffused one, whereby also non-skilled users take part in the game. It involves a series of practices at the intersection of the social and the technological dimension of human action, with two aims: either resisting massive data collection, or actively pursuing the exploitation of available data for social change.

For analytical purposes, we have identified two sub-fields of data activism: re-active and pro-active. Re-active data activism comprises the practices of resistance to the threats to civil and human rights that derive from corporate and government privacy intrusion. Pro-active data activism embraces those individuals and civil society organizations that take advantage of the possibility for social change and civic engagement offered by big data. Re-active and pro-active data activism constitute two facets of the same phenomenon, which has data and information at its core. They are enabled by software to manipulate data or to shield one’s online interactions from intrusion and automated collection. In this article, however, we focus on the pro-active side of data activism, and explore its connections with existing journalism and media practices.

The notion of data activism represents a conceptual innovation at the crossroads of a sociological process (organising collectively in order to take action), a cognitive activity (making sense of complex information), and a sociotechnical practice (the technology, namely the software to manipulate the data, is central to data activism). Studying such an empirical phenomenon, hence, calls for an interdisciplinary approach able to take into account its multidimensional nature. In the next section, we survey contributions from a variety of disciplinary fields, namely: media studies, social movement scholarship, journalism studies, and international relations, in view of grounding the notion of data activism on existing literature.

A Kaleidoscopic Perspective on Data Activism Seen From Different Disciplines

Data activism is an emerging empirical phenomenon for which we need to develop a new vocabulary of interdisciplinary concepts and mechanisms. How do we study a social phenomenon that is rooted in communications technology (and information), and is positioned between the social and communicative dimensions of human action? Here we offer an overview of useful concepts as they emerge from various disciplines at the interplay of social sciences and humanities. The concepts we survey serve the purpose of illuminating different aspects of data activism, and will allow us to refine our notion in light of the literature.

From (Alternative) Media Studies: Citizen Media and Empowerment

Data activism signals a change in perspective and attitude towards massive data collection emerging at the core of the civil society realm. There are evident links with the long tradition of alternative, independent and community media that bring citizens at the forefront of media production.

Over the years, media scholars have proposed different labels to describe non-commercial grassroots media: radical media (Dowling, 2001), citizens' media (Rodriguez, 2001), alternative media (Atton, 2001), tactical media (Garcia and Lovink, 1997), autonomous media (Langlois and Dubois, 2005) (and counting). Hackett and Carroll (2006) referred to “oppositional communication practices”, emanating from the lifeworld and centred on lifeworld change, and seeking to cultivate alternative public spheres. Alternative media scholar John Downing defined radical media as “media, generally small-scale and in many different forms, that express an alternative vision to hegemonic politics, priorities, and perspectives”. By nature, these media “break somebody’s...
rules, although rarely all of them in every as-
pact" (Downing, 2001: v-x). However, it is the
concept of citizens’ media that offers the most
powerful insights for the study of data activ-
ism.

What makes the notion of citizen’s media so
appropriate for the subject matter is its focus
on empowerment and the politics of daily life.
Within the communication sphere, empower-
ment is the process through which individuals
and groups, by taking active part in the actions
that reshape their communicative processes,
exercise control over their communication re-
sources and messages. It is in this active exer-
cise of control over technologies that people,
including non-experts, are empowered (Mi-
citizens’ media as a space for people to enact
their democratic agency beyond traditional
means like voting. Furthermore, she argued
that “these practices and strategies of resis-
tance constitute the politics of the quotidian.”
They expand and multiply spaces for political
action, which is not confined to institutional
spaces but embedded in social life and daily
peer interactions (p. 21).

Interestingly, Rodriguez draws on radical de-
mocracy and feminist theories to define citi-
zens’ media. In her words, citizens’ media imply
that “a collectivity is enacting its citi-
zenship by actively intervening and transfor-
mimg the established mediascape; second, that
these media are contesting social codes, legi-
timized identities, and institutionalized social
relations; and third, that these communication
practices are empowering the community in-
volved, to the point where these transforma-
tion and changes are possible” (p. 20). All of
the above apply to data activism as well, albeit
to different degrees. If the contestation ethos
and the challenge to established identities and
social relations is common to the two approa-
ches, data activism differs from citizens’ me-
dia in that it anticipates also a variety of in-
dividual practices. There is within the field of
data activism a novel tension between the in-
dividual and the collective dimension of orga-
nized collective action, which risks to sideline
the community terms of reference so central
in the definition of alternative, community
and citizens’ media.

From Journalism Studies: Journalism Meets Data (And Social Change)

In spring 2010 WikiLeaks released a video en-
titled Collateral Murder, featuring a US Army
helicopter shooting Iraqi civilians. The public
debate spurred by the release forced US autho-
rities to react. Over the last few years, Wiki-
Leaks’ revelations have offered an unpreced-
dented amount of raw material for investiga-
tive journalism, which resulted in the partner-
ship with five prominent media organisations,
including El Pais and The New Yorks Times.

Dan Gillmor (2005), one of the most prominent
representatives of a journalism that takes si-
dies, declared: “Maybe it’s time to say a fond
farewell to an old canon of journalism: objec-
tivity. But it will never be time to kiss off the
values and principles that undergird the idea”.

Looking at WikiLeaks and at the recent tra-
jectory of the journalism field offers some
insights into the emergence of data activism.
Three genres, in particular, directly speak to
data activism practices, namely investigative,
advocacy, and citizen journalism. investigati-
ve journalism is believed to be journalism at
its best. It entails objective reporting on sub-
jects that are of interest to the citizenry, when
others are attempting to hide these matters
from the public” (Northmore, 2001). On the
contrary, advocacy journalism deliberately
adopts a partisan perspective in reporting. It is
fact-based, but it openly takes sides (Careless,
2000), as these journalists feel that the public
interest is better served by media diversity
and transparency.

Since the 1990s, internet has revolutionized
journalism practices, and has “busted open
the system of gates and gatekeepers” typical of
mainstream media (Rosen, 2006). As a result,
citizen journalism emerged, opening up the
newsroom to non-professionals. According
to Rosen (2008), we see citizen journalism in
action “[w]hen the people formerly known as
the audience employ the press tools they have
in their possession to inform one another.”
Curiously, citizen journalism has acquired
popularity also within mainstream media, as
a tool for involving the audience in news-mak-
ing as “producers” (Bruns, 2008). It has limi-
ted resemblance with what others have called
alternative journalism (Atton and Hamilton,
2009), although it differs in that it seeks to sa-
figue some ambitions of objectivity typical of
traditional journalism. The familiarity with
the notion of citizens’ media described above,
however, is very limited, as the latter delibe-
rately positions itself in the realm of subaltern
counterpublics (Fraser, 1992), rather than see-
king integration with the mainstream.

The advent of big data has signalled an evo-
lution in journalism too, exemplified by “data
journalism”. Data journalism makes use of
advanced social science and computational
methods to find stories in complex data sets.
It represents an evolution from precision jour-
nalism, that is to say journalism that uses ad-
vanced research methods to bring a level of
rigor to journalistic work beyond anecdotal
represents (Rosen, 2010), although it differs in
that it seeks to satisfactorily fulfill the
main focus from being the first ones to report
to being the ones telling us what a certain de-
velopment might actually mean” (Gray and
Chambers, 2012). And, as journalists are using
data to move further, they progressively move
from observation into analysis and declara-
tion, raising awareness and recommendations.
This is the case of “advocacy data journalism”.

Data journalism calls for the development
of specific skills in programming and advan-
ced statistical methods, that are not typically
part of the skillset of old-school journalists.
Thus, the journalists’ engagement with data
prompts unprecedented alliances, which are
of paramount relevance for observers of data
activism. For example, the international grass-
roots network Hacks/Hackers connects jour-
nalists (“hacks”) and technologists (“hackers”),
facilitating skill exchange between the two
groups (Hacks/Hackers n.d.). A variety of plat-
forms that ease the task of navigating and making sense of data facilitates the connections and collaboration between the professionals of information and common citizens with interest for their social reality. For instance, the Open Knowledge Foundation has developed the open-source data portal CKAN, used by laymen to explore datasets made available as “open data” by their governments; the OpenStreetMap online platform allows non-experts to explore over 13 million government financial transactions from 66 countries.

From Social Movement Studies: Technical Identities and Informal Communities

September 2011. Anti-austerity protesters try to occupy the New York Stock Exchange on Wall Street, but are turned away by the police. They withdraw to the nearby Zuccotti Park, and an encampment that will set in motion the so-called “Occupy Wall Street” worldwide protests. The Occupy slogan (“We are the 99%”) calls attention to the disempowered 99 percent of the world population as it is disenfranchised by a privileged minority managing resources like access to credit. “It was really interesting to see how interested in data that movement has been. The 99% versus the 1% is a data query,” argued Simon Rogers, editor of the Guardian Data blog. Occupy protesters “have managed to use data to show what is happening around the world” (Bonechi, 2012). Furthermore, several social movement currents and sub-cultures influence today’s data activism: for example, the hacker culture of the 1970s and beyond (Levy, 1984); the US media reform activists advocating technical engagement as a way of confronting elite expertise (Dunbar-Hester, 2014); the radical technology activism of the 1990s (Milan, 2013a); the digital rights activists as they engage in technological resistance (Postigo, 2012); the do-it-yourself attitude of hackerspaces, hacklabs and makerspaces (Maxigas, 2014); the technology-and product-oriented movements such as the open-source culture (Hess, 2005). Data activists have borrowed from these sub-cultures the emphasis on hands-on activism, and the notions of knowledge sharing, peer collaboration, access to information, code tinkering, and world improvement through technical fixes. Surveying closely this scholarship will provide generous hints to interpret present-day data activists and their impact on society as a whole.

In Social Movements and their Technologies, Milan (2013b) explored the interaction between social movements and their “liberated technologies”, focusing on the upsurge of radical internet projects (“emancipatory communication practices”) as a political subject. She explained how radical tech groups, which create autonomous, under-the-radar alternatives to ordinary communication systems and networks, contribute to change how people communicate in daily life. Similarly, data activists engage in practices that will, in the long run, change the ways activists campaign and media (including citizens’ media) disseminate information. Both contribute peculiar progressive values and mechanisms to the society they live in, as their value systems and organizational models emphasize collective, open and decentralised creation and decision-making.

Dunbar-Hester (2012) has studied low-power radio broadcasting in the US, focusing in particular on those groups promoting critical engagement with the technology (for example, building radio towers to transmit the airwaves). She points to the emergence of a “technical identity” rooted in the hands-on attitude activists develop through their technology-mediated activism. Practitioners use this technical identity to actively “mark the boundaries between their group and others in the terrain of media democracy work” (Dunbar-Hester, 2012, p. 149).

There is something to be learnt for the study of data activism from the literature on scientific and intellectual movements that has emerged from science and technology studies, and has intersected social movement studies. Activists of technology-and product-oriented movements such as open-source software activism are inherently political, as their hands-on practices seek ultimately to alter power distribution (Latour, 1987). They engage in the “development of new or alternative forms of material culture” (Hess, 2005). Occasionally, they might establish connections with private sector firms, which they see as potential allies in the promotion of alternative technology. Similarly, data activists might partner up with small, alternative software companies to market their data-crunching products.

Finally, there is much to learn from recent studies on technology-mediated collective action, whereby activists use electronic communication technologies to communicate, lobby, build communities, organize, and coordinate action, but also from radical forms of internet activism such as cyberactivism and hacktivism. There is a burgeoning of literature on the subject matter, so here we highlight only those contributions that appear to be more useful to understand data activism. Bennett and Segerberg (2012), for example, elaborated on the notion of “connective action”, where the mediation of digital technologies promote personalised interactions, emphasising the links between individual users rather than between organisations and movements. We have observed this dynamic at play also within more radical forms of internet activism (c.f. Milan and Hintz, 2013), as well as data activism.
From International Relations: Transnational Advocacy Networks as Information Agents

In 2013, the United Nations’ Department of Economic and Social Affairs Under-Secretary-General Wu Hongbo called for more data in development. “Statistics is shaping our understanding of the world,” he said addressing the UN Statistical Commission (UN DESA, 2014). This renewed interest by multilateral organizations and governments alike for data and statistical evidence is likely to alter the advocacy strategies of a myriad of civil society organizations, who will move away from moral arguments into statistical evidence in advocating for their causes.

Whereas much is known about the evolution of transnational activism in the internet era (see, for example, della Porta and Tarrow, 2005), to date scholars have not addressed the evolution of transnational civil society structures and dynamics in relation to the dramatic change in the global information flows. International relations scholars Keck and Sikkink offered a conceptual tool, namely the notion of transnational advocacy networks (TANs), which is potentially useful in interpreting data-prodded dynamics within the global civil society. Finally, literature on transnational networks of radical internet activism, these “[n]ew forms of trans-border de-localised communication and informal collaboration” (Hinz and Milan, 2009), has not considered the advent of big data, which is grounded on data analysis but at the same time goes beyond it by engaging directly with institutions such as companies and governments. In addition, looking at data activist TANs will enable us to observe closely how the advent of big data alters the power dynamics within the transnational civil society. Finally, literature on transnational networks of radical internet activism offer hints for the analysis of data activist TANs: although they usually embody highly principled preferences associated with a call for institutional or policy change, they tend to be excluded from traditional policy arenas (Hinz and Milan, 2009).

Revisiting Pro-Active Data Activism: A Research Agenda

Pro-active data activism identifies an emerging field of action that combines communicative practices and the social elements of collective organizing with information at its outermost complexity: “big data”. It is characterized by a multiplicity of arrangements and actors, both collective and individual, as well as a wealth of different tactics of engagement with data. Pro-active data activism tactics range from technology development projects and platforms for the manipulation of data and the visualization of data patterns for campaigning and advocacy. In light of the literature review, we now revise and expand our notion of data activism.

Data activism emerges at the intersection of several fields of human action, including both communicative process (activism and advocacy, and the subaltern counterpublics interested in empowerment through media and technology) and information-related professions (data analysis and journalistic investigation). Figure 1 shows the dynamic interactions between these different fields.

Figure 1. Data activism and neighbouring fields of action.

The figure can be explored clock-wise, starting from the big data quadrant, which sets in motion the empirical phenomenon of data activism. When big data, and data analysis practices and tools, meet citizens’ media and other grassroots experiences that put empowerment through active engagement with media at the centre, there emerge instances of “civic hacking”. Civic hackers are technologists and open-data activists who engage with datasets to address challenges relevant to their community. On the contrary, when citizen’s media encounters activism and advocacy, we witness the emergence of media activism. In turn, when activism and advocacy join journalistic practices and values we observe the emergence of advocacy journalism. When big data intersects journalism, and investigative journalism in particular, we have data journalism.

It is, however, at the intersection of more quadrants that the most noteworthy trends come into being. When advocacy journalism and investigative journalism cross paths with available data and data-analysis software, we have the sub-field of “advocacy data journalism”, which combines the traditional values of journalism with crunching data and a social change ethos. At the juncture of the four circles, finally, we find “pro-active data activism”.

What notions and mechanisms are apt to study such a complex and inherently interdisciplinary field of action? From journalism studies, we have learnt that there are values of objectivity, fairness and accuracy that pro-active data activists, too, embody. From (alternative) media studies, we derive the focus on empowerment mechanisms as they intersect communities, and the notion of activism as an every-day critical engagement with the surrounding social reality. International relations offer hints on how to integrate transnational power dynamics into the analysis of a phenomenon that is local and transnational at the same time. The emerging data activism networks take the form of trans-border de-localised communities, while operating as transnational advocacy networks. Similar to other instances of radical internet activism, these “new forms of networked action and informal collaboration
are challenging traditional notions of civil society" (Hintz and Milan, 2009), and are radically different from traditionally organized collective action. Nonetheless, we suggest approaching data activism using the tools of social movement studies.

Social movement studies help us to understand data activism as a new form of grassroots engagement with technology, one that entails direct action, cultural forms of resistance, and coding. Similar to other activism tactics, these strategies provide activists with a "moral voice", which gives them the opportunity to articulate and affirm their principles and preferences (Jasper, 1997). A few key concepts derived from the literature on social movements are particularly useful to study data activism: for example, one can study activists' collective identity, that is to say the “interactive and shared definition” by individuals who recognise that they share certain orientations and, on that basis, decide to act together (Melucci, 1996), asking how is a collective identity created on the basis of a technical identity. We can also investigate the organizational forms typical of data activism: what groupings are more conducive to data activism activities and practices? What internal mechanisms regulate them? Finally, we can study the relationship between pro-active data activists and institutions and social norms, including national governments and multilateral organizations.

Ultimately, pro-active data activism can be considered a new, advanced form of citizens’ media, one that has a critical approach to big data at its core. Similar to citizens’ media, pro-active data activism involves a politics of the quotidian, as it alters the everyday relationship between citizens and automatized data collection. As such, it brings back into the data collection machine the fundamental elements of agency and politics. Similar to other social movements, pro-active data activists work towards long-term norm change: they struggle for “the social control of the main cultural patterns (...) through which our relationships with the environment are normatively organised” (Touraine, 1985). Thus, in the long run, data activism is likely to change the way citizens approach computational politics and the informational state, as well as the way we see and practice social change. 

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