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Reversing Data Politics: An Introduction to the Special Issue

Stefania Milan and Lonneke van der Velden

Digital data increasingly plays a central role in contemporary politics and public life. Citizen voices in the so-called public sphere are increasingly mediated by proprietary social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, and are thus shaped by algorithmic ranking and re-ordering. “Calculated publics” fashioned by “new kinds of human and machine interaction” (Amoore and Piotukh 2016, 2) replace communities of interest. Most controversial at the time of writing is what we may call the ‘dirty politics’ of data analytics company Cambridge Analytica (Graham-Harrison, Cadwalladr, and Hilary Osborne 2018), which reportedly played a role in a number of electoral campaigns, such as the US presidential election and the Brexit referendum: algorithms were used to profile, target and influence voters, on the basis of millions of private profiles of Facebook users, unaware of their data being collected, sold and used for these purposes. But data informs how states act, too: since 2013, the whistleblower Edward Snowden has offered ample evidence of the connivance of the data industry with intelligence services, to the detriment of citizens’ privacy and political oversight (Greenwald 2014). Cambridge Analytica and the Snowden leaks are just two of the many cases showing how data has opened up an unregulated arena for new actors that play a role in today’s politics. Data has become the new currency for many processes within contemporary democracies—from the fight for electoral consent to the protection of national security, from

advertising to the monitoring of citizens. Many aspects of the state and the market today have to do with the ‘data economy’ and its rules (or lack thereof).

In this special issue, we are also interested in ‘data politics’, but we want to shift the focus of the conversation. Big data corporations and intelligence agencies are not the only ones acting on ‘datafication’: the process of turning into monetizable and analyzable data many aspects of life that had never been quantified before, such as people’s emotions and interpersonal connections. Non-governmental organizations, hackers, and activists of all kinds provide a myriad of ‘alternative’ interventions, interpretations, and imaginaries of what data stands for and what can be done with it.

The idea of this special issue emerged during a two-day workshop on ‘Contentious Data’ hosted by the research group DATACTIVE at the University of Amsterdam in September 2016 (DATACTIVE). As the organisers argued elsewhere, these emerging forms of ‘data activism’, that is to say the socio-technical mobilizations and tactics taking a critical approach towards datafication and massive data collection, offer new epistemologies able to counteract the mainstream positivistic discourse of datafication (Milan and van der Velden 2016). Data activism can be understood as a contemporary evolution of already existing phenomena like radical tech activism and hacktivism (Milan 2017). It represents yet another possible manifestation of activism in the information society—one that, however, explicitly engages with the new forms information and knowledge take today as well as their modes of production, challenging dominant understandings of datafication. Because datafication is such a prominent feature in public life, data activism, as a way of responding to its challenges, might progressively appeal to more diverse communities of concerned citizens, beyond the expert niche of previous incarnations of tech activist engagement. We believe that this shifting terrain represents an interesting testing ground for contemporary philosophy and theory-building in general.

Like the workshop, this special issue of *Krisis* aims to present a wide range of philosophical and theoretical perspectives on emerging forms of grassroots

engagement with datafication. We bring into dialogue scholars and practitioners who critically explore the politics of data from the perspective of grassroots activism, organised civil society, and the citizenry at large. Thus, several of the articles illustrate or critically engage with the notion of data activism.

Jonathan Gray's article "Three Aspects of Data Worlds" starts off the special issue by introducing and developing the notion of "data worlds". Exploring several theoretical traditions of conceptualising worlds, worlding and world-making, Gray suggests ways of looking beyond prominent narratives about data politics – such as the liberation of data as a resource, and Orwellian visions of data surveillance – to consider how data can be involved in providing horizons of intelligibility and organising social and political life.

In "Living with Data: Aligning Data Studies and Data Activism through a Focus on Everyday Experiences of Datafication", Helen Kennedy reflects upon the field of 'data studies' as it emerges around the phenomenon of datafication. Her contribution rethinks the field of philosophy of technology in light of the data justice agenda often propagated by data activists, and advocates for a focus on emotions and everyday lived experiences with data.

The third article by Lina Dencik, entitled "Surveillance Realism and the Politics of Imagination: Is There No Alternative?" puts forward the notion of 'surveillance realism'. By building on Mark Fisher's definition of capitalist realism (Fisher 2009), Dencik explores the pervasiveness of contemporary surveillance and the emergence of alternative imaginaries, looking into how the UK public responded to the Snowden revelations.

The following three articles engage with or tackle the notion of data activism by delving into paradigmatic case studies. Stefan Baack's piece on "Civic tech at mySociety: How the Imagined Affordances of Data Shape Data Activism" investigates how data are used to facilitate civic engagement. More specifically, he shows how 'civic technologists' think of themselves as facilitators of civic engagement, and how this relates to the agency of these novel publics in relation to state institutions.

In "Data Activism in Light of the Public Sphere", Miren Gutiérrez explores how activists can make use of data infrastructures such as databases, servers, and algorithms. In her analysis, data infrastructures make new forms of activism possible by creating spaces for dialogue, consensus and networked action. Her case study, namely the Ushahidi software, allows for a reflection on the evolution of the public sphere in relation to data activism.

In "Ambiguity, Ambivalence, and Activism: Data Organising Inside the Institution", Leah Horgan and Paul Dourish critically engage with the notion of data activism going beyond some of the assumptions around the distinction between grassroots activism and the government. By looking at everyday data work in a local administration, they show how activist ideals are pushed forward in a bureaucratic setting. Meyerson and Scully's notion of 'tempered radicalism' (Meyerson and Scully 1995) serves as a useful lens to describe a particular form of data tactics deployed by 'outsiders within'.

To complement the articles, the special issue features an interview with philosopher and media theorist Boris Groys by Thijs Lijster, whose work *Über das Neue* enjoyed its 25th anniversary last year.

Finally, three book reviews enrich this special issue, illuminating three key aspects of datafication, namely involuntary disclosure as a radical form of informational democracy, the role of platforms, and the evolution of subjectivity. Patricia de Vries reviews Metahavens' *Black Transparency*; Niels van Doorn writes on *Platform Capitalism* by Nick Srnicek and Jan Overwijk comments on *The Entrepreneurial Self* by Ulrich Bröckling.

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Biographies

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