

DATA AS NARRATIVE: CONTESTING THE RIGHT TO THE WORD

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Biography

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ABSTRACT

This article asks what are the fundamental processes underlying the possibility of data activism. It argues that, if like everything else, social movements are being datafied, this operates on at least four levels: a change in the general conditions under which all social movements operate, data becoming either the specific or general object of activism, and finally data becoming crucial to practices of movement resistance. Underlying this is a further pattern, that data as narrative is increasingly an important aspect of contestation in contemporary politics. I interpret this general phenomenon through the lens of the social theory of Alberto Melucci and the leader of the Zapatistas movement, Subcomandante Marcos.

KEYWORDS

Datafication; narrative; symbolic conflict; the word; data activism.

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‘Once it is recognized that the power of information is essentially the power of naming, we can set out on the enormous task of redefining the “right to the word” that is called for in the information age’ (Melucci, 1996, p. 228)

In recent years, a new word has entered our research vocabulary: (in English) datafication (Van Dijck, 2014). Datafication gestures towards something enormous: a general transformation of the social fabric, of the very stuff from which social contexts, social interfaces, social interactions and social space more generally are made. The transformation happens, quite simply, because the elements, inputs and scenes of social life are themselves becoming data. Many areas of social and economic production have been transformed (to name a few: agriculture, health, education, the workplace, logistics, government). It is no surprise that social movements are being transformed too. This applies, whatever macro-theory one adopts to make sense of the advance of datafication, for example surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019) or data colonialism (Couldry and Mejiias, 2019).

To say therefore that social movements are datafied is merely a truism, as Milan and Beraldo note in their article. That truism tells us nothing, unless we clarify in what specific sense social movements are *distinctively* being datafied, compared with other areas of daily life. In this short article, I will try to provide a brief overview of some of the ways in which this is happening.

Four Levels of Social Movements’ Datafication

We can identify at least four levels on which social movements as distributed human groups that work for transformative social change are being transformed by datafication. The articles in this special issue illustrate each of them.

First, datafication transforms the general *conditions* under which any movement, whether it is calling for social change or not, can operate. The circumstances of right-wing populist movements that work to restore an imagined exclusivist utopia and so reverse decades of hard-fought progress on human rights and cultural/social recognition, as in today’s Argentina, Brazil, Germany, Poland, and US are being transformed by datafication just as much as are those of the movements that seek to resist those populists, and indeed as much as the conditions of groups not concerned with any form of social change (local choirs, sports clubs, yoga schools, and so on).

One general aspect of this effect what has been called ‘institutionalization’ (Couldry and Hepp, 2016, pp. 217-18): that is, the growing pressure to build data collection and data use into mechanisms of mobilisation and group formation, that, in a broader sense (given the complex technological infrastructure required), involves the institutionalization of social movements. One can see datafied forms of institutionalization as a constraint on action (new types of data skill are needed now by movements, which may cost money), but also as an opportunity. Poon (forthcoming) argues for the latter in her article about how activists in Hong Kong contest the Chinese state by conducting important organizational work via an encrypted network such as Telegram. Such opportunity only arises however within a wider context where the surveillance risks for social movements, both today and in the future (that is, as their archived communications on their phones and elsewhere become vulnerable to

surveillance by the state), are on average rising. The balance of risks from the massive increase in the surveillance and encryption capacities of both states and corporate communication platforms will however play out differently in different locations, depending on the states and platforms relevant to a particular social movement.

A different way in which the general conditions of social movements are changed by datafication is discussed by Wright (2022). As the sorts of things that social movements target for contestatory action become not social policies or broader social or economic injustices, but increasingly the information infrastructures in which all social action is today entangled, the frequency of political opportunities for intervention becomes rarer. The reasons relate not so much to the detailed features of data, as to the dislocation between the temporality of infrastructure (such as the infrastructure of the internet backbone) and the temporality of mainstream political struggle: this dislocation is huge and, for some types of deep data activism, absolute. The result is to change the rhythm of social movement activism, or at least those versions of it that have to challenge information infrastructures of various sorts.

The next two levels on which datafication transforms social movements are more specific. They relate to the distinctive *objects* of social movement action. A lot depends here on the angle of vision of particular social movements, which of course varies enormously and for reasons linked to the particular societies in which they are embedded.

One way in which data is transforming social movements is by shifting the *specific object* which they contest. Milan and Beraldo (forthcoming) give some clear examples of this: battles for data justice in the US over how specific groups and individuals are represented in powerful state and corporate databases, battles over who controls the operation and application of those databases, and so on. Alternatively, cases where the workings of data gathering are contested, as with the Indian government's Aadhaar identity system. Muravyov's article (2022) gives a particular interesting example of how data on the Russian transport system is a direct site of activist contention, and serves as an entry-point to wider contestation of the information politics of Russia's authoritarian state. Sometimes protesting about data means challenging the means of its extraction and processing and the larger narratives generated from it; sometimes, as Li and Whitworth (2023) bring out, it is a matter of reversing processes of data formation so as to turn the tables on a powerful actor, such as the Chinese state, receiving 'a dose of its own medicine' by becoming subject to sousveillance by Hong Kong activists.

Note that data activism of this sort will sometimes be about algorithms (the automated calculative mechanisms for generating new data from existing data), but often it will operate at other levels: challenging the design of databases, the formulation of data categories and data aggregates, the linkage of otherwise unconnected databases.

A related, third, level where datafication transforms the daily circumstances of social movements is by reconstituting the *general object* of their activism. This happens when a movement is contesting not specific data, but the whole infrastructure (not necessarily technological) from which specific data are generated. This might be a state infrastructure (as in Russia or Hong Kong) or it might be a corporate infrastructure as with Google's attempts to build a fully datafied public space in Toronto, discussed by Charitsis and Laamanen (2022). The latter paper shows well how, when datafication becomes a general target of movement action, important overlaps with wider social movements (movements that do not

take data, whether generally or specifically, as their object) come into view. As one Canadian activist cited by Charitsis and Laamanen put it: ‘we strongly believe that Toronto can win against Alphabet/Sidewalk Labs and their plan to take over our lives and spaces’.

The fourth level on which datafication changes social movements is perhaps the most discussed so far in the data activism literature. This is where data becomes intrinsic to social movements’ methods of resistance, whatever the social process those movements are resisting. In a datafied society, data are a tool of social action in every aspect of daily life, from using a phone to setting up a group for collaboration. which means data are a site of agency by social movements. It is sometimes suggested that macro-theories of how we interpret datafication rule out attention to such agency (Lash, 2007), but this doesn’t follow. Take the framework of data colonialism for example. It doesn’t follow from this theory that there is no room for individual agency to resist it. On the contrary, the goal of developing such a theory can be seen as stimulating such agency and resistance, understanding data colonialism as a social order which is built *through* human agency on all scales, in which everyone is complicit, until, that is, they are not and they start resisting it (Couldry and Mejias, 2019, chs. 1 and 6). Data, in any case, are at root symbols, and, like all symbols, they are at some level contestable, that is, subject to reinterpretation: data categories can be used and turned against themselves, or at least against the intentions of their designers. (From the point of view of recognising agency, Zuboff’s top-down model of surveillance capitalism as a ‘coup from above’ (2015, p. 86), which operates without any consent or complicity may be a little different).

Datafication therefore is quite consistent with possibilities of agency. This is what Treré and Bonini (2022) set out to explore. Data can be involved as part of the basic institutionalization of movements, as we saw earlier, or as a specific tool and mechanism of resistance, for example where algorithms, and their modalities of automation, are contested, or manipulated against their designers’ intentions. Spain’s 15M movement which emerged in the aftermath of the 2007-2008 financial meltdown provides, as they say, a well-known example of this (see also Postill, 2014). One related point is however worth making: that what matters with agency in relation to datafication is the contestation of *data*, rather than necessarily algorithms. Algorithms are only one dimension of datafication, which perhaps raises a question about the usefulness of terms such as ‘algorithmic activism’. Very often it is something about data other than the workings of the algorithm that is being contested (for example, the construction of data categories, their combination into larger data aggregates, the linking of previously unconnected databases), but such activism is no less important for that.

An underlying pattern: Data as Narrative

Is there an underlying pattern beneath these four levels of how datafication transforms social movements that, if we can clarify it, might illuminate the field of datafied social struggle in a broader way? There is, I suggest, and that is the idea of data as narrative.

The possibility of data as narrative is implicit in the quote from the great theorist of ‘new’ social movements, Alberto Melucci, from which I started. Melucci made this point in the course of a more fundamental investigation of ‘the field of conflict’ (1996, p. 4) in contemporary social and political struggles. That field is profoundly transformed, Melucci argued with remarkable foresight, in a world where ‘the real domination is today the exclusion from the power of naming’ (1996, p. 182).

Melucci could not of course have anticipated today's world of social media, apps, and point-to-point surveillance and sousveillance, let alone the datafication of every aspect of daily life. But he already grasped the direction of travel towards a world where contestation of information and symbols would become central and transformative. As he put it already in his earlier book, *Nomads of the Present*, in late modern societies 'conflicts develop in those areas of the [social] system which are crucial for the production of information and symbolic resources, and which are subject at the same time to the greatest pressure to conform' (1989, p. 55). It is hard to imagine a better general formulation of the shift of social contestation and resistance over the past two decades via the uses of social media as an organising and mobilising tool, for example, in the misnamed "Facebook revolutions" which occurred in Egypt and Tunisia in 2011 (Castells, 2013). For sure, Facebook is a symbolic resource, but also a site of huge pressure to conform, a site, if you like, where social order is reproduced.

For a more poetic and polemical expression of a similar point, we can turn to the leader of the Zapatista movement, a radical movement that in Mexico, from 1994 onwards, contested the long history of unequal land rights and exploitation of indigenous populations (Hayden 2002). Its leader, Subcomandante Marcos, wrote:

Power uses the word to impose his empire of silence. We use the word to renew ourselves. Power uses silence to hide his crimes. We use silence to listen to one another, to touch one another, to know one another. (Marcos, 2011, p. 84).

Marcos pits the Zapatistas' strategic use of the word and silence against their strategic use by large-scale power.

How do these broader visions of contemporary social movements fit with the analysis of four levels just developed? The first level was explicitly about how datafication changes the background conditions of social movements: this fits therefore with Melucci's general analysis, but does not have much to tell us about *how* datafied social movements contest the social. The next three levels however fit within Melucci's vision of the growing prominence of information and symbolic contestation in contemporary conflict. More specifically, the three levels of data-targeted, or data-enabled, social movements (compare Milan and Beraldo's (forthcoming) distinction between data as content and data as infrastructure, and Treré and Bonini's (2022) distinction between algorithmically-enabled and algorithmically-oriented activism) can, all of them, be seen as examples of the growing centrality of battles over 'the right to the word' in Melucci's phrase.

When we step back from the complex stack of automated information technologies that make contemporary data extraction possible, what *are* data but an attempt by corporations, or states or combinations of them, to read and speak the world on their own terms and activists, in turn, to contest those privileged readings, that privileged speech? While activism is today, trivially, datafied, data-related practices of activism are attempts to contest those practices' representation of the world on some scale or other.

The core issue then, underlying all the complexities of term about data-related activism, is narrative. This remains true, even though a crucial aspect of all data is not just words, but quantification: the counting of myriad categories, formulated in computer code. Data must be contested, because it enforces *one* narrative of the world, in which are encoded particular

interests and power relations. Activists, by contesting data, are contesting narratives of this sort. This is the specificity of data-related activism.

Framing the topics of this special issue in this broader way however brings out a further point: that it is important not to emphasise the technological details of what activists are now doing, if that means losing sight of those broader issues of narrative. It is quite possible for activists to become too focussed on the micro-details of data strategy and fail to develop a wider narrative which effectively contests the whole state of society that needs to be challenged. What matters most, in the end, are not questions of data, but the articulations between data-related practices and the wider terrain of the social.

Put another way, what matters most is how, through data, the right to the word is today being fought for in new and important ways. Melucci's and Marcos' insights endure in ways they could not have expected. Let me end by recalling one of the deepest forms of data activism at work today: the contestation by Black activists, particularly in the US, of their exclusion from the basic practices and skill sharing of computing for much of computing's history. In response, as Charlton McIlwain has eloquently shown, they build a counter-practice of 'black software'. 'Black software', he writes (McIlwain, 2020, p. 7), 'refers to the programs we desire and design computers to run. It refers to who designs the program, for what purposes, and what or who becomes its object or data'. In this way, data activism becomes integral to the very constitution of knowledge and politics today.

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