

Our data futures: Towards *non-data-centric* data activism

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The social science debate that attends to the exploitative forces of the quantification of aspects of life previously experienced in qualitative form, recognising the ubiquitous forms of datafied power and domination, is by now an established perspective to question datafication and algorithmic control (Ruckenstein and Schüll, 2017). Drawing from the critical political economy and neo-Foucauldian analyses researchers have explored the effects of the datafication (Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier, 2013; Van Dijck, 2014) on the economy, public life, and self-understanding. Studies alert us to threats to privacy posed by “dataveillance” (Raley, 2012; Van Dijck, 2014), forms of surveillance distributed across multiple interested parties, including government agencies, insurers, operators, data aggregators, analytics companies, and individuals who provide the information either knowingly or unintentionally when going online, using self-tracking devices, loyalty programs, and credit cards. The “data traces” add to the data accumulated in databases and personal data – any data related to a person or resulting from actions by a person – becomes utilized for business and societal purposes in an increasingly systematic matter (Van Dijck and Poell, 2016; Zuboff, 2015).

In this presentation, we take an “activist stance”, aiming to contribute to the existing criticism of datafication with a more participatory and collaborative approach offered by “data activism” (Baack 2015; Milan and van der Velden, 2016). The various data-driven initiatives currently under development suggest that the problematic aspects of datafication, including the tension between data openness and data ownership (Neff, 2013), the asymmetries in terms of data usage and distribution (Wilbanks and Topol, 2016; Kish and Topol, 2015) and the inadequacy of existing informed consent and privacy protections (Sharon, 2016) are by now not only well recognized, but they are generating new forms of civic and political engagement and activism. This calls for more debate on what new data initiatives and forms of data activism are, and how scholars in the humanities and social science communities can assess them.

By relying on the approaches developed within the field of Techno-Anthropology (Børsen and Botin, 2013; Ruckenstein and Pantzar, 2015), seeking to translate and mediate knowledge concerning complex technoscientific projects and aims, we positioned ourselves as “outside insiders” with regard to a data-centric initiative called MyData. In 2014, we became observers and participants of MyData, promoting the understanding that people benefit when they can control data gathering and analysis by public organizations and businesses and become more active data citizens and consumers. The high-level MyData vision, described in ‘the MyData white paper’ written primarily by researchers at the Helsinki Institute for Information Technology and the Tampere University of Technology (Poikola et al., 2015), outlines an alternative future that transforms the ‘organisation-centric system’ into ‘a human-centric system’ that treats personal data as a resource that the individual can access, control, benefit and learn from¹.

¹ We refer here to what the MyData activists call ‘the MyData white paper’, the English-language document (Poikola et al. 2015) which is a summary of a Finnish study commissioned by the Ministry of Transport and Communication in (Poikola et al 2014). The aim behind the study was to promote public discussion of the model’s potential and impact with respect to handling of personal data. The Finnish-language version is more comprehensive in its outlining of the MyData approach, and we rely also on that version in our discussion.

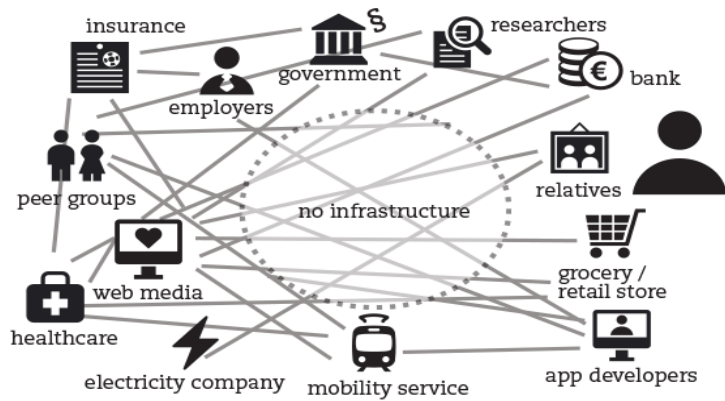


Figure 1 illustrates how the MyData developers perceive their vision compared with the current situation.

The presentation discusses “our” data activist stance and the activism of technology developers, promoting and relying on two different kinds of “social imaginaries” (Taylor, 2004). The notion of the social imaginary, offered by the political philosopher Charles Taylor (2004), aids in the exploration of how people make sense of society’s practices, imagine their social existence, and deal with “the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (Taylor, 2004: 106). By relying on the concept of social imaginary, we open a perspective onto data activism that highlights contested social expectations, along with their ideological and political underpinnings. As we explain in our forthcoming paper, the aim of this exercise is to compare different forms of data activism in order to clarify the kinds of political and social alternatives they offer. Current data-driven initiatives often proceed with a social imaginary

that treats data arrangements as solutions to, or corrective measures for, unsatisfactory developments. They advance the logic of an innovation culture reliant on the development of new technology structures and computationally intensive tools, thereby encompassing an engineering attitude that does not question the power of technological innovation to provide societal solutions or, more broadly, the role of datafication in societal development (Baack, 2015).

Instead, the goal of our activist stance is to introduce other social aims and expectations; informed by the critical stance representative of social scientific inquiry, it questions the optimistic and future-oriented social imaginary of technology developers; indeed, as we will demonstrate, the position we take is incompatible with the engineering attitude in a profound sense. In order to craft a narrative about the MyData initiative that aligns with our social imaginary, we wanted to push the conversation beyond the usual technological, legal, and policy frameworks, and suggest that, with its techno-optimism, current MyData work might in fact weaken data activism and public support for it (Kennedy, forthcoming). We turned to literary and scholarly sources with the aim of opening a critical, but hopefully also a productive conversation about MyData in order to offer ideas of how to promote socially more robust data activism. A seminal text that provides insight into the MyData initiative is the *Autonomous Technology – Technics-out-of-Control as a Theme in Political Thought* (1978) by Langdon Winner. Winner perceives the relationship between human and technology in terms of Kantian autonomy: via analysis of interrelations of independence and dependence. The core ideas of the MyData vision have particular resonance with the way Winner (1978) considers “reverse adaptation”, wherein the human adapts to the power of the system and not the other way around.

In our presentation, we first describe the MyData vision, as it has been presented by the activists, and then situate it in the framework of technology critique and current critique of digital culture and economy. Here, we demonstrate that the outside position can, in fact, resource a re-articulation of data activism. After this, we detail some further developments in the MyData scene and possibilities that have opened for dialogue and collaboration during our data activism journey. We end the discussion by noting that for truly promoting societally beneficial data arrangements, work is needed to circumvent the individualistic and data-centric biases of initiatives such as the MyData.

While we describe the ideological and political underpinnings of data activism, paying attention to social expectations and imaginaries, the activist roles and positions that social scientists can take become clearer. We suggest that in order to make their stance understandable in data activism circles, social scientists need to be aware of the strengths and limitations of their social imaginaries

in order to engage in cross-professional dialogue. Social scientists should also refine their critical faculties, for instance when addressing questions concerning citizenship, participation, dignity, inequality, and discrimination. Data activists generally expect empirically grounded and easily communicated suggestions of how harmful developments could be identified and overcome; as Sarah Pink and Vaike Fors (2017) have suggested, in order for digital data to become a part of processes of change, data practices need to be aligned with ‘the generative processes of everyday life’. With a focus on ordinary people, professionals, and communities of practice, ethnographic methods and practice-based analysis can deepen understandings of datafication by revealing how data and associated technologies are taken up, valued, enacted, and sometimes repurposed in ways that either do not comply with imposed data regimes, or that mobilize data in inventive ways (Nafus and Sherman, 2014).

By learning about everyday data work and actual material data practices, humanities and social science scholars can strengthen the understanding of how data technologies could become a part of promoting and enacting more responsible data futures. Paradoxically, in order to arrive at an understanding of how data initiatives support societally beneficial developments, we argue that *non-data-centric* data activism is called for. By aiming at non-data-centric data activism, we can continue to argue against technological solutionism in ways that are critical, but do not deny the possible value of digital data in future-making. The non-data-centric data activism meshes critical thinking into the mundane realities of everyday practices and calls for historically informed and collectively oriented alternatives and action. We suggest that non-data-centric data activism is a form of data activism that can act imaginatively with and within data initiatives to develop new concepts, frameworks and collaborations in order to better steer them.

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