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Mirko Tobias Schäfer and Karin van Es (Eds.), **The Datafied Society: Studying Culture Through Data**, Amsterdam, Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2017, 267 pp., $31.50 (paperback), $89.10 (hardcover).

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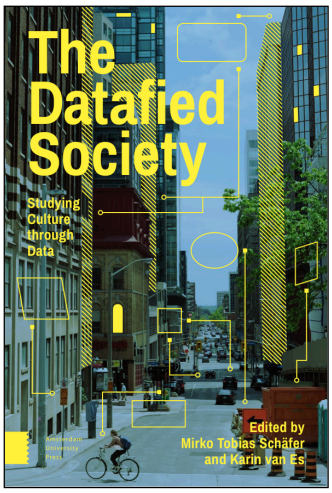

The Datafied Society: Studying Culture Through Data, edited by Mirko Tobias Schäfer and Karin van Es, is an open access anthology of academic debates and reflections on the theories, methods, practices, and ethics of digital data research from the interpretive and critical perspectives of humanities scholars. Through the contributions of 33 scholars, the edited volume "approaches datafication as a process of mediatisation, and provides a theoretical and methodological toolkit for those wanting to study culture through data" (p. 11). Interdisciplinarily related, broadly viewed, profoundly explored, and full of vivid data visualizations and case studies, the book will likely appeal to humanistic, cultural, media, sociological, and informatics scholars and students by providing them with an in-depth and balanced understanding of how a datafied society works and how culture can be studied through data from different angles. It will also "inform users, policymakers and the general public about the many factors that make up a data set, shape analysis and generate visualizations" (p. 19).

Objective and Structure

The Datafied Society aims to "stimulate and engage humanities scholars via their perspectives on debates and reflections on the theory and practices of digital data research" (p. 21). It begins with an introduction and proceeds with 19 chapters structured in four sections: (1) "Studying Culture Through Data," (2) "Data Practices in Digital Data Analysis," (3) "Research Ethics," and (4) "Key Ideas in Big Data Research." The compelling introduction conducts a thorough literature review and probes the computational turn and datafication as a source of epistemological transformation and paradigmatic shift, and then summarizes the content of the four sections. The first two sections present an interpretative debate on a wide range of digital research methods, practices, and case programs concerning the study of culture through data. The third and fourth sections critically reflect the concerns and ethics in digital research, particularly concerning "big data." All parts present original and critical discussion of digital research by humanities scholars.

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Specifically, the first section covers different original methods. In chapter 1, the author discusses, in an exploratory manner, how humanistic data research has served as the backdrop to an encounter between two sets of epistemic traditions, hermeneutic and empirical, over the past two decades. Chapter 2 analyzes how the underlying social and technical methods, such as Cultural Analytics, Cinemetrics, and ACTION, "attribute meanings to data visualizations as epistemic images in order to elicit the tools' differences" (p. 40). Chapters 3 and 5 investigate the specific methods of Cultural Analytics and query design strategy, respectively, and contain some interesting dimensions, such as employing "wide data" (p. 66) instead of "long data" or "big data," and utilizing "search as research" (p. 92) as another method. Chapters 4 and 6 present case studies and follow closely on the heels of the previous chapters.

Section 2 concentrates on data practices and methodological issues. Chapter 7 briefly summarizes the five central challenges encountered in the computational turn of humanities research and raises a notion of digital *Bildbung* as a means of facing these challenges. Chapters 8 through 10 look at how big data and algorithms can enable new cultural and social forms, questioning the transparency of algorithms and issues of social data application programming interfaces, or APIs. Fascinatingly, chapter 11 illustrates the narrative affordances and storytelling potential of networks through an examination of the network of characters in *The Iliad*. In chapter 12, the authors attempt to outline a reflexive, transparent procedure to guide digital data research by virtue of their own research experience.

Section 3 focuses on research ethics, encompassing concerns about moral issues when conducting digital research and reflections on how big data can be discriminatory. In chapter 13, the authors adopt a view of ethical pluralism and propose a three-stage system to protect the integrity of big data research. Chapter 14 outlines their guiding principles of ethical decision-making in digital research. Chapter 15 explores the invisible discriminatory functions of big data and their implications for a datafied society. The authors' reflections on these issues can be fruitful for general data analysis.

In the concluding section, "Key Ideas in Big Data Research," chapter 16 introduces the author's understanding of the big data "myth." Emerging in the humanities, a data point taken from social media platforms is used to investigate social interaction and cultural production. However, chapter 17 tends to formulate a data point critique and calls for a public debate on data points. Chapter 18 challenges the exceptionalism of the algorithm. In the final chapter, the author demonstrates the importance of humanities scholars consciously striving to interact and understand technology through dialogue. All these chapters fulfill their objectives through Q&A interviews. In the four in-depth interviews, four well-respected scholars draw sound conclusions or make appropriate reflections from their own experience of working with big data.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Just as José van Dijck states in the foreword of the book, "datafication—transforming all things under the sun into a data format and thus quantifying them—is at the heart of the networked world" (p. 11). In this context of datafication, we increasingly interact with our social, cultural, and political environment through the use of digital technologies (Hintz, Dencik, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2017, p. 731). The communicative affordances of digital media, such as portability, accessibility, and multimediality (Schrock,

2015), coupled with enhanced interactivity, unlimited capacity, and blurred boundaries, indicate a paradigm shift toward the big data approach in media and communication studies. According to *The Datafied Society*, the context of datafication and the big data paradigm "will constitute the core of twenty-first-century processes and practices" (p. 11), and "will come to affect all research agendas" (p. 15), including those in the humanities and social sciences.

The growing range of investigations into big data issues (boyd & Crawford, 2012; Kitchin, 2014; Mayer-Schonberger & Cukier, 2013; Stephens-Davidowitz, 2017; Wang & Jiang, 2017), as well as the ongoing debates in the digital humanities (Arthur & Bode, 2014; Berry, 2012; Gold, 2012; Grusin, 2014), suggest that countless issues deserve to be discussed regarding this "computational turn" (p. 13). *The Datafied Society*, comparatively speaking, provides a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of the computational turn and datafication context from the perspective of the digital humanities as a whole. The book develops digital methods more intensively and attaches greater importance to ethical reflections rather than other topics. As a result, the original methods and innovative case programs, mostly presented in the first two sections, are the biggest contribution to digital humanities research. Another contribution should be attributed to the researchers' profound and critical reflections—found mainly in the last two sections—on digital ethics, as well as their own roles in their research practices and processes, meeting the challenges of the data-driven paradigm and even the whole data-fueled world. The authors give detailed suggestions and key ethical principles concerning decision-making while carrying out digital research through the lens of their own research experience. The literature's strength lies in its timeliness, whereas the research tools show strength through their originality. Overall, interdisciplinary communities could gain new insights and thought-provoking ideas from this book.

While most essays in the collection touch on important lines of exploration in the digital humanities, they do not always illuminate all relative themes in complete ways. The element of culture, or the cultural factor, is sometimes absent from the discussion. Although the book contains a number of vivid illustrations and figures, the data visualizations are sometimes difficult to interpret. With clear graphs and maps, the book could offer a more fascinating demonstration of the application of data visualizations and case programs.

Conclusion

Despite a few minor limitations, *The Datafied Society* delivers on its promise to provide an interdisciplinary look into digital data research, particularly from the specific perspectives of humanities scholars. The authors convince us that the humanities have much to offer in societal debates about data through their profound understanding of cultural complexity and their critical inquiry into the current context of datafication. As we live in an increasingly digitized society, these cultural and critical interpretations become extremely important. The authors of this edited volume not only investigate the datafied society but also establish key standards in building it. On all accounts, the book is a useful anthology of essays for anyone interested in studying culture during the era of the computational turn.

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