

**SOCIAL MOVEMENTS &
MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES/
PRESENT CHALLENGES
FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS**



THE SoME SEMINAR SERIES

The SoME Seminar Series is jointly organised by the Centre for Global Media and Democracy at Goldsmiths University of London and the Centre on Social Movement Studies based at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Florence. The aim of the series, which takes place in 2015 and 2016 for a total of six seminars, is to tackle and critically understand one of the crucial societal changes of our times: the relationship between political participation and media technologies.

The first seminar of our series *Mobilisations: Changing Protest Cultures and Web 2.0 Technologies* explored how Web 2.0 technologies are re-shaping protest cultures as well as movements' organisations and networking dynamics. In the second seminar we turned our attention to the complex relationship between social conflict, mainstream media and the issue of visibility. Our seminar *Visibilities: Social Protest, 'The Media', and the Shaping of Public Opinion* engaged with critical questions about the extent to which social movements are able to achieve visibility for their political messages and on the continuing role mainstream media play in the shaping of public opinion. In the third seminar, titled *The Activist, the Academic and Digital Media: Challenging Research, Re-thinking Theory*, we took a step back and reflected on the often under-investigated relationship between academic knowledge, activist practice and digital technologies. In the fourth seminar of the series titled *The Missing Actor: The Meaning of Political Cultures for Media/Movements Interactions* we focused on the meaning and role of political cultures in the activists' everyday experience of media/movements interactions.

**THE SUBVERSION OF BIG DATA
CULTURES, DISCOURSES AND PRACTICES OF BIG DATA IN SOCIAL
MOVEMENTS CONTEXTS**

17 & 18 November 2016

Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, Scuola Normale Superiore
Palazzo Strozzi, Via degli Strozzi 1, Florence

In the fifth seminar of the series we address the concept of big data as a contested terrain of imagination and practice which is understood in different ways by economic and political powers on the one hand and political activists on the other. This seminar focuses on these discursive tensions by exploring activists practices and beliefs about big data. In particular, we aim at deconstructing the concept of big data from an activist perspective and at discussing how social movement actors related to big data. More specifically, we explore big data in three different panels: a) activists' data cultures and big data b) activists' discourses on big data; and c) activists' practices involving big data.

DAY 1 - 17 November 2016

09:30-10:00

WELCOME COFFEE

10:00-12:30

PANEL ONE - Activists' data cultures in the understanding of big data

Chair: Alice Mattoni, Scuola Normale Superiore

For a long time now activists have managed different types of social data for civic purposes in the context of their mobilizations. In doing this, they developed different attitudes and beliefs towards data, including what citizens can do with them and to what extent they can be embedded into social movement activities. This panel looks at big data through the lenses of different activists' data cultures in order to put the emergence of big data, and their integration within activists' repertoires of contention, into an historical and cultural perspective.

Stefania Milan, University of Amsterdam
Arne Hintz, Cardiff University
Sebastian Kubitschko, University of Bremen
Alberto Cossu, University of Milan

12:30-14:30

LUNCH BREAK

14:30-16:30

PANEL TWO - Social practices related to big data in activists' contexts

Chair: Marco Deseriis, Northeastern University and Scuola Normale Superiore

Activists are not just passive producers of data when they mobilize. On the contrary, they often consciously engage in social practices that include the gathering, analyzing, and visualizing of big data in the context of their activist projects. This panel discusses such social practices related to the use of big data in the broad framework of social movements. The aim is to unveil the liberation potential of big data for citizens and their grassroots initiatives as well as the repressive capacities of big data when it comes to activists and their (revolutionary) projects.

Alessandra Renzi, Northeastern University (via Skype)
Elena Pavan, Scuola Normale Superiore
Lonneke van der Velden, University of Amsterdam

DAY 2 – 18 November 2016

10:30-12:30

PANEL THREE - The discursive construction of big data in activists' strategies and tactics

Chair: Elena Pavan, Scuola Normale Superiore

Big data has so far been theories and understood as a tool of power. Scholars and researchers interested in data cultures have focused on issues such as digital surveillance, corporate exploitation of data flows or the quantification of the self. In this context little is known on how activists understand big data. How do activists discursively construct big data? How do these constructions intertwine with the way in which activists decide to include (or exclude) big data platforms and interfaces in their mobilizing strategies and tactics? The aim is to discuss and compare from a political and cultural perspective the many ways in which activists can frame – and then eventually use – big data and to take decisions, construct knowledge, and engage in protest.

Lina Dencik, University of Cardiff
Marco Deseriis, Northeastern University and Scuola Normale Superiore
Stefan Baack, University of Groningen

12:30-14:30

LUNCH BREAK

14:30-16:30

KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Data Excess and the Politics of Technicity

Marc Cotè, Kings College London

KEYNOTE SPEAKER ABSTRACT

Data Excess and the Politics of Technicity

Marc Coté, Kings College London

This talk will explore the political possibilities inherent in big data—namely pervasive datafication, processes which quantify, calculate, qualify, classify, categorise and otherwise produce knowledge about ourselves and the world around us in an increasingly real-time and nonconscious manner. A pessimistic perspective evinces more intricate integration into cycles of production and consumption, and subjection to deep networks of dataveillance. Yet it is precisely this troubling and increasingly asymmetrical political economic turn that demands datafication be subjected to critical and creative action. As such, I will suggest that the possibility of optimism lies grounded in an excess inherent in the very technical objects of datafication. Drawing on the conceptual insights of Gilbert Simondon, and a series of UK- and European Research Council funded projects, this paper will propose a techno-cultural method as a possibility for social movements to critically unpack the data materiality of the human condition under datafication and counter the tendency toward control and value extraction. Those research projects opened our data to increased access and agency: ‘Our Data Ourselves’ entailed collaborating with teen coders to hack their smartphones to create a social data commons for collective use; ‘Persona Non Data’ transformed a London gallery into an interactive site of personal data harvesting, opening up the algorithms, packet sniffing and processing to public scrutiny. This talk will seek dialogue on ways social movement can gain critical political traction through the techno-cultural method and consider how the excess of technicity articulates collective life.

PAPER ABSTRACTS

PANEL ONE - Activists’ data cultures in the understanding of big data

Data cultures at the grassroots: Alternative epistemologies and the tech

Stefania Milan, University of Amsterdam

Datafication “reframes key questions about the constitution of knowledge” [1]. Big data have brought about a novel, powerful system of knowledge, with its own epistemology and specific ways of framing, packaging, presenting and activating information. They have fundamentally altered the conditions under which we make sense of the world and act upon it. But novel data countercultures emerge at the fringes of the datafied society, propelled by new forms of civic engagement and political action that I have termed “data activism”. Data activism indicates the range of sociotechnical practices that interrogate the fundamental paradigm shift brought about by datafication. Data activism supports the emergence of novel epistemic cultures within the realm of civil society, making sense of data as a way of knowing the world and turning it into a point of intervention and generation of data countercultures. In this presentation I explore data activism as a producer of counter-expertise and alternative epistemologies, reflecting in particular on how these are articulated in relation to technology and software cultures.

[1] boyd, dana, Crawford, K., 2012. Critical questions for Big Data. Provocations for a cultural, technological, and scholarly phenomenon. *Information, Communication & Society* 15, 662–679.

Data conflicts: The struggle over surveillance practices, interpretations and policy

Arne Hintz, Cardiff University

The revelations by NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden have illustrated the scale and extent of digital surveillance carried out by security and intelligence agencies. They have thereby helped place the widespread collection and analysis of people's personal data on the both public and academic agenda. Debates in the wake of the Snowden leaks concerned the extent of state interference in civil life, the protection of civil rights in the context of security, the role of corporate platforms in data collection, and the consequences of datafication. Fundamentally different understandings of the nature, need and impact of data collection emerged between different social actors, including security agencies, Parliamentarians, industry, civil society, and different types of news media. These start with the very definition of surveillance and stretch across its rationales and implications, as well as the norms and values that underpin them. But also within the activist and civil society realm, perspectives differ greatly, from fundamental critique to the proactive use of data analysis. These conflicts over fundamental views and practices regarding datafication must be situated in the contested terrain of contemporary surveillance capitalism. Digital business is operating at the core of data streams and their exploitation, the state expands both the collection of citizen data and the policy foundations of this endeavor, and prediction and pre-emption become the standard forms of addressing social problems. In this context, the perspectives and strategies of different activist sectors become crucial in either aiding or constraining future data uses. This paper will explore the breadth and implications of conflicts over surveillance data. It is based on findings from different sets of interviews with activists and digital rights campaigners, which were conducted in late 2015 and early 2016 as part of the collaborative research project "Digital Citizenship and Surveillance Society: UK State-Media-Citizen Relations After the Snowden Leaks".

How hackers engage with and counter surveillance assemblages

Sebastian Kubitschko, University of Bremen

It seems no longer overstated to say that almost any form of political engagement today relates in one way or another to media technologies and infrastructures (MTI). Along the way, MTI have increasingly become sites of an active political struggle in their own right. A telling example that I want to discuss in this presentation is the way hackers critically engage with and counter contemporary surveillance assemblages. Hacker collectives – ranging from infamous groups like Anonymous to less-known grassroots efforts like *Frei-funk* – do a lot of stuff *with media* but their primary objective is to *act on media*. While the intimate relationship between technologies and surveillance goes at least back to evidence-producing tools like photography and telephony, the intensified conjunction of popular online platforms, locative media and

big data analytics has introduced both a qualitative and quantitative difference. At the same time surveillance has merged into a corporate/government joint venture. To deepen understandings on the entanglements of hacker cultures and surveillance, this paper presents findings from qualitative research on Europe's oldest and one of the world's largest hacker organizations – the Chaos Computer Club (CCC). Club members invest high hopes in the emancipatory force of technology, but at the same time they problematize the risks that the technological pervasion of almost any domain in society involves. In addition, Club members are actively involved in shaping the features and values of the technologies they use. Engaging with and countering surveillance in the case of the CCC manifests itself in form of direct engagement with technical devices and systems as well as through interacting with different actors, through articulating viewpoints, and through sharing knowledge and experiences in different circumstances.

Embracing Big Data. An analysis of art-activists' discourses on contemporary data flows

Alberto Cossu, University of Milan

Big data represent a highly controversial issue in society and in the activist field alike. They represent both a resource to be exploited for political purposes and constitute the space in which micro-level and large scale exploitation can take place. Drawing on my research on the field of artistic activism, and using a qualitative approach, I intend to explore how activists are shaping their discourse around big data. Main sources will be an ethnographic and discursive analysis of two projects carried out by Macao “The New Center for Arts, Culture and Research of Milan”, squatted and active since May 2012. The first project deals with a complex media project carried out to scrutinize the 2013 edition of Fuorisalone (The Design Week of Milan) and its valorization process, deploying big data analysis as a foundation for a critical discourse. The second project, started in 2016, addresses the narrative of a dark future in which big data, automation of work and algorithmization will dramatically affect our lives. This project, named RH – Rethink How – (created by Macao and Robin Hood Minor Asset Management, involving 10 researchers) took place within and around the Expo 2016 of Milan and aimed to gather data from the workers of Expo to understand how they viewed the future of work. At the same time, it propelled a wide reflection on the relation between humans and machines. The two projects, also contribute in identifying a new phase for artistic activism, insofar as artists in the early 2010s needed knowledge to produce critique, now they appear to use a critical approach to produce new knowledge. In my paper I argue that, for a portion of the activist field, namely the artists, big data are : a) understood in a post-dialectic manner for which not only activists do not create their own autonomous media anymore, but they experiment with the big data produced by commercial media platforms; b) a site of intervention in which activists directly attempt to redirect mainstream flows of communication and to distort the imaginary around them on a discursive level.

PANEL TWO - Social practices related to big data in activists' contexts

Activists are not just passive producers of data when they mobilize. On the contrary, they often consciously engage in social practices that include the gathering, analyzing, and visualizing of big data in the context of their activist projects. This panel discusses such social practices related to the use of big data in the broad framework of social movements. The aim is to unveil the liberation potential of big data for citizens and their grassroots initiatives as well as the repressive capacities of big data when it comes to activists and their (revolutionary) projects.

Data in the Megacity: Jakarta's urban poor struggle against evictions
Alessandra Renzi, Northeastern University (via Skype)

Jakarta is the second-largest city in the world. Its vertiginous growth feeds massive real estate expansion and the construction of water management infrastructure of unprecedented size and cost—the Great Garuda Seawall is an archipelago of reclaimed islands in the shape of the iconic Garuda bird, allegedly designed to mitigate Jakarta's frequent floods. These developments result in the expulsion and impoverishment of local communities, and anti-poverty activists are reclaiming data, big and small, as a resource to fight against the evictions of informal settlements from the urban core.

My fieldwork and participation in a co-design project with Jakarta's Urban Poor Consortium (UPC) reveal activist practices that challenge aggressive urban planning with alternative data and models for sustainable design and climate adaptation. UPC's work rearranges the relations between data, material structures and bodies, and reveals new potential for resistance in the Asian megacity and beyond. At the same time, their struggle leads us to reconsider the currency of shorthand labels like neoliberalism and of traditional notions of agency to grasp the intensification of forces and powers that social movements confront today. Thus, to examine the context and emergence of UPC's data activism, this talk draws attention to the entanglement of computation, knowledge, infrastructure, politics, capital, subjectivities, and the climate in Jakarta—an information-rich sociotechnical environment where the transformation of the city and its inhabitants is intensified by data, algorithms, and software.

Beyond Volume, Velocity and Variety. Building “big” data from the scratch to fight online gender-based violence

Elena Pavan, Scuola Normale Superiore

In this paper, I argue that a more genuine appreciation of how big data can become a resource within collective efforts passes through the adoption of a critical perspective on the features that typically determine their “bigness” – i.e., volume, velocity and variety. Looking at the case of Take Back The Tech! (TBTT), a campaign effort aimed to reclaim ICTs to end gender-based violence, I begin to explore how collective actors engage in the production of “bigger-than-usual” databases and the specific meaning and forms the features of volume, velocity and variety take when they are contextualized within particular collective efforts. As an entry point to this discussion, I look at the TBTT platform MapIT – an attempt to systematically identify, collect and visualize upon a digital platform episodes and testimonies of ICTs-related abuses

perpetrated across the globe. On this platform, the volume of data collected is not comparable to the millions of inputs generated by sensors; the velocity with which instances are collected is far from the immediacy that is typical of digital communication data; and variety is better referred to the heterogeneity of forms in which online gender-based violence can occur. Although they do not comply to the mainstream reading of “big data”, the data underneath the MapIT platform provide an unprecedented “big” resource for TBTT – one that is particularly suited to sustain the campaign both materially, by unveiling the pervasiveness of online gender-based violence, and symbolically, by providing a starting point to the construction of narratives that underpin mobilization and action dynamics.

Forensic devices and data activism

Lonneke van der Velden, University of Amsterdam

In this presentation I reflect upon a particular mobile phone application, *InformaCam* (also known as *CameraV*). This app mobilizes the tracking capacity of mobile devices for the sake of producing potential evidence in the context of human rights activism. InformaCam, developed by The Guardian Project, deals with metadata, such as GPS data or the device number, embedded in the make-up of a file. When posting images or videos online one likely also uploads potentially identifying metadata along with them. InformaCam allows users to remove those metadata and counter potential surveillance. However, the app can also make a second version of the documentary material. In this version, contextual metadata is not obscured but deliberately captured, encrypted and stored. Moreover, when images are assembled together the annotated data could prove useful for event analyses. I argue that the project acts as a 'forensic device' by arranging metadata suitable for (activist oriented) investigations. This application can be understood as a form of 'data-activism'. Data-activism is a notion currently developed by the DATACTIVE research group at the University of Amsterdam. It is an umbrella term that indicates grassroots mobilizations enabled but also constrained by software, which take a critical stance towards massive data collection (<http://data-activism.net>). InformaCam, I argue, takes part in an emerging data culture in which the possibilities of 'big data' are imagined in alternative ways.

PANEL THREE - The discursive construction of big data in activists' strategies and tactics

Big data has so far been theories and understood as a tool of power. Scholars and researchers interested in data cultures have focused on issues such as digital surveillance, corporate exploitation of data flows or the quantification of the self. In this context little is known on how activists understand big data. How do activists discursively construct big data? How do these constructions intertwine with the way in which activists decide to include (or exclude) big data platforms and interfaces in their mobilizing strategies and tactics? The aim is to discuss and compare from a political and cultural perspective the many ways in which activists can frame – and then eventually use – big data and to take decisions, construct knowledge, and engage in protest.

From privacy to power – reshaping data debates in political activism

Lina Dencik, University of Cardiff

The collection and analysis of data generated through the proliferation of digital technologies has led to a significant shift in understandings and practices of governance in broad terms. Rooted in a system of datafication of social, political and economic spheres, different actors are incorporating surveillance practices into central operations of management and prediction of human behaviour. This has provided an incredibly powerful regime of control that extends into the most intimate aspects of everyday life. However, resistance to surveillance is frequently framed around the individual right to privacy, and enacted through the individual use of surveillance-circumventing technologies. Although this provides an avenue for the pursuit of data protection and enacts forms of digital rights in practice, it constitutes a limited framework for understanding the implications of datafication processes in society. In particular, based on research for the ESRC-funded project Digital Citizenship and Surveillance Society with political activists in the UK, this paper will argue that such a framing of surveillance isolates debates on (mass) data collection and analysis to only particular expert communities and places the onus of resistance on the individual. As our research demonstrates, political activists outside digital rights and tech activist communities are largely disengaged with the issue and do not actively consider it as part of their agendas nor integrate counter-surveillance technologies into activist practices. Rather, they 'outsource' these concerns to specialist groups, and regulate their own practices within an accepted mainstream that limits the potential risks of being monitored. There is, therefore, a need to situate surveillance - as the cornerstone of datafication - within a context that can fully consider the social, political, cultural, environmental and economic implications of data-driven processes, highlighting the relevance of datafication for broader social justice concerns. Advancing a framework of 'data justice', this paper will outline a research trajectory that seeks to articulate data harms (and remedies) in relation to social justice, providing an avenue to illustrate the connection between different activist agendas and allowing for a more collective understanding of data debates.

Anonymous as a Condividual Mode of Subjectivation that Escapes the Analytic of Big Data

Marco Deseriis, Northeastern University and Scuola Normale Superiore

This paper discusses the hacktivist network Anonymous as a form of data activism and mode of subjectivity that escapes and subverts the analytic of Big Data on three distinct levels: 1) The political economy of data; 2) the composition of discrete data points within homogenous ensembles; 3) the capacity of Big Data to modulate and anticipate the future. On the level of political economy, Big Data extracts value from the analysis, correlation, and mining of data sets that are easily available. In contrast, Anonymous organizes through platforms and channels whose users rely on pseudonyms and whose interactions are often not recorded. Rather than reading this obfuscating tactic as a *reaction* to dataveillance, I argue that Anonymous' obfuscation expresses a *condividual* mode of subjectivation that is alternative to the condividuality of Big Da-

ta. Indeed, whereas Big Data recombine individual data points in commensurable sets, Anonymous' condividuality is not algorithmically determined. Thus, on a second level, Anonymous is a concrete expression of the primacy of the molecular and the heterogeneous within an assemblage that cannot be unified, represented, and made to serve a predetermined function. Thirdly, drawing from Gilbert Simondon's notion of transduction, I argue that Anonymous evolves by leaps and bounds as it couples humans and technical ensembles with a high degree of indetermination. If one of the defining features of Big Data is prediction, Anonymous escapes prediction without, however, being completely random.

Civic tech at mySociety: Promoting openness through structure

Stefan Baack, University of Groningen

'Civic tech' roughly describes technologies that aim to solve 'civic' problems by improving government services and empowering citizens. Examples of civic tech applications are parliamentary monitoring websites or tools that make reporting issues to local governments easier. Despite a growing prominence of civic tech, there is next to no research that examines the practices and self-understandings of 'civic hackers' and how this might affect the distribution of knowledge and power in society. To address these questions, I will present findings from a case study about mySociety, a British NGO and one of the oldest and most influential civic tech organizations. Drawing from a mix of interviews, online content and network analysis, I will show that mySociety builds on open source and participatory culture, but also extends them by relying on the affordances of structured data. Consistent with previous forms of open politics, mySociety is concerned with making governments more participatory and transparent in order to produce more representative and democratic outcomes. What is new is mySociety's emphasis on improving 'feasibility', i.e. on making participation more feasible by removing frictions that make engagement with governments more difficult and time consuming. In practice, this means translating the bureaucratic and legal procedures followed by governments into user-friendly interfaces with accessible language. I will show how structured data is key for this translation as it creates new forms of legibility and actionability; and discuss how this incentive to capture phenomena in standardized data formats situates mySociety in a political economy driven by big data.