Chapter Fifteen: Good Data is Critical Data: An Appeal for Critical Digital Studies

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# Abstract

In social science, approaches that call themselves critical tend to be concerned with advancing some kind of emancipatory political cause, often drawing in some way on Marxian perspectives. In Fairclough’s words, such approaches ask, ‘how do existing societies provide people with the possibilities and resources for rich and fulfilling lives, how on the other hand do they deny people these possibilities and resources?’. They are critical of prevailing social and material relations, and the ideologies that justify these unequal relations. Critical digital research is a field of study that often focuses on the tip of the spear of ideology and capitalist production in contemporary society. In this chapter we will discuss different critical approaches to this field, and how they relate to ethical standards and good data, arguing that they demand new ideas in terms of what research we do, and how we do it.

# Introduction

Data produced by people in their online interactions and transactions has become a vital tool and commodity in digital capitalism, and is likewise vitally important for many areas of critical digital studies: we cannot analyse online sociality, interaction and labor unless we have data produced by these processes. Digital social data present troubling questions for critical digital researchers: What can be a way to improve knowledge and understanding of digital society while fostering an ethical approach towards digital data? How can we make sure that academics avoid harming subjects? and at the same time, how can we avoid reinforcing structures of domination/exploitation in our data collection, storage and dissemination? In short, what is ‘Good Data’ when it comes to critical research? In this chapter we want to use a Marxian perspective as well as theoretical ideas developed in critical media studies and digital sociology to discuss the use of digital data, and suggest a methodology based on a critical ethical approach. We will begin by discussing the online context where this data is produced, and providing an overview of ethical and methodological literature related to digital social data, before we focus in particular on the works of Christian Fuchs, Antonio Casilli and Karen Gregory. We have selected these authors because we feel that together they provide a politico-economic interpretation of digital social data. Through this, we will advance the argument that ‘Good Data’ is data that can be used to highlight and critique the power dynamics connected to the use of digital social data, by stressing the particular economic and technological environment from where they are generated.

# Digital social data and platforms

Under contemporary capitalism, digital data is becoming increasingly central in the relationship between companies, workers and consumers, and a new site of growth and profitability following the decline in manufacturing.[[1]](#footnote-1) This is most visible in areas of global informational capitalism, where data is exploited by giant transnational corporations (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft etc). In this context, ‘The platform has emerged as a new business model, capable of extracting and controlling immense amounts of data’:[[2]](#footnote-2) platforms enroll people in the production process, and provide a variety of services or commodities on a peer-to-peer level. These can be social interactions, as in Facebook or Twitter, or services such as Airbnb, Uber, Deliveroo and so on. Data are at the centre of this ‘platform capitalism’.[[3]](#footnote-3) ‘Clicks’, ‘likes’, ‘tweets’, as well as geolocation, traffic information, food preferences, and all other activities and behaviors that leave digital traces (including body data from wearable devices), are routinely gathered and monetized by platforms. User-generated data, either as a by-product of transactions or as metadata produced within platforms online, are very valuable for data brokers, data analytics industries, advertisement companies, artificial intelligence developers, but also public bodies such as intelligence agencies.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Despite their massive value, the public lacks awareness of the importance of their digital data. Platforms emphasize the joy of participation rather than the ‘costs’ connected to these services, creating an opaque system where the majority of users (with the exception of technologists, activists and academics) are generally unaware of their role in generating value for companies. Only very recently, with the Cambridge Analytica case, a public discussion has started. Cambridge Analytica has demonstrated how the personal data of Facebook users (and similar platforms) are routinely employed without their full awareness by corporations interested not only in commercial but also political targeting and ‘surveillance capitalism’.

# Methodological and Ethical Problems Raised by Academics About Digital Data

Discussions about opportunities and limitations of digital social data have run for almost a decade. Scholars have been particularly concerned with the possible ways to adapt methodologies to these new data,[[5]](#footnote-5) and the relationship between ‘old’ methods and new ‘natively digital’ methods.[[6]](#footnote-6) Optimistic and pessimistic views have piled up. A ‘computational turn’ in social research, initially fuelled by enthusiasm for the opportunities of volume, velocity and variety of ‘Big Data’[[7]](#footnote-7) has been especially influential, but also widely criticized. Authors have stressed the shortcomings of user-generated data (e.g. not suitable for statistical sampling), especially when coupled with a strong ‘data-driven’/empirical approach.[[8]](#footnote-8) Big Data have been especially troubling because of their ideological implications: the belief that if ‘bigger is better’, and if we can analyse large data sets, then the type of knowledge produced will be truer, more objective and accurate.[[9]](#footnote-9) In contrast, more critical approaches to data studies have stressed that data are ‘never simply neutral, objective, independent, raw representations of the world’,[[10]](#footnote-10) but are produced by - and influence - economy, society, and knowledge.[[11]](#footnote-11) This is why stronger normative reflections on the ethics and politics of digital data and the role of researchers are urgently needed.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Debates on the ethics of digital social data have been developing for the past 20 years.[[13]](#footnote-13) Internet research ethics, and particularly their practical application in the context of ethical approval of research projects, are geographically and historically contingent. It is important to acknowledge that what is considered best practice can vary a great deal by time and place. In their overview of the preceding of 20 years of internet research ethics, Elizabeth Buchanan emphasises that early ethical issues and positions, drawing on biomedical conceptions of research participants and concerned with fundamental questions, were problematised by the emergence of the social internet, and challenged again by the increasing prominence of Big Data research.[[14]](#footnote-14) The rapid pace of change driving digital technologies has consistently presented new challenges for ethical research standards. For contemporary researchers, Big Data is of particular concern. Conceptualising Big Data as a social phenomenon as well as a collection of technologies, boyd and Crawford define it as interplay of phenomena, combining the technologies of very large data sets, the tools and techniques to analyse them, and the resulting ‘*Mythology*’ of knowledge claims associated with this technology and analysis.[[15]](#footnote-15) In this paper we are concerned with Big Data associated with ‘social media interactions’,[[16]](#footnote-16) but Big Data itself extends far beyond social media, and into many disciplines and industries besides digital social science. In discussing the ethical implications of Big Data, boyd and Crawford emphasise what are now familiar issues: the ambiguity around public and private spaces, as well as issues around informed consent and potential harm, and the ‘highly context-sensitive’ nature of online spaces .[[17]](#footnote-17) While they argue that it ‘may be unreasonable to ask researchers to obtain consent from every person who posts a tweet’,[[18]](#footnote-18) they are also skeptical of approaches that treat publicly available social data as ‘fair game’ simply because it is public. Overall, they stress that ethically sound research should reflect on issues of accountability, ‘both to the field of research and to the research subjects’,[[19]](#footnote-19) which involves considering the implications of a given research project.

Similarly, Zimmer[[20]](#footnote-20) uses Nissenbaum’s[[21]](#footnote-21) idea of ‘Contextual integrity’ as a decision heuristic to help researchers to understand and address the ethical dimensions of big data research projects. The theory of contextual integrity ties adequate privacy protection to the preservation of informational norms within in specific contexts, providing a framework for evaluating the flow of personal information between agents to help identify and explain why certain patterns of information flow are acceptable in one context, but viewed as problematic in another.

While our research has occurred in a British context, what counts as ethical internet research can vary extensively by country, and even institution. Based in Denmark, Klastrup states that at the time of their research, Danish universities did not have ethical review boards, nor formal standards for ethical internet research, instead utilising a system of ‘collegial mentoring’, though even in this case the AoIR guidelines were adhered to by many researchers.[[22]](#footnote-22) In a specifically United States context, the rapid pace of technological change appears to have led to a situation where ‘research regulations have not kept up with the methods and stakeholders’, [[23]](#footnote-23) typified by the lack of regulatory response to the infamous Facebook contagion study.[[24]](#footnote-24) And although there were widespread debates around the issue, there is still a lack of broad institutional consensus as to whether such studies are even unethical.[[25]](#footnote-25) Discussing internet research ethics in a non-western context, Honglandarom[[26]](#footnote-26) highlights that internet research in Thailand ‘apparently suffers from lack of attention to ethical concerns’,[[27]](#footnote-27) due to a lack of clear national or institutional guidelines and awareness, which they argue is broadly the case ‘for other Asian countries also’.[[28]](#footnote-28) Some, however, are more similar to our experience of ethical review in a British university in terms of restrictions. In their discussion of the Canadian system, where a national ethical framework is applied by individual institutional ethical review boards, Seko and Lewis [[29]](#footnote-29) emphasise that there exists a ‘gap in pragmatic guidelines’ in how to best apply ethical judgements concerning internet research.[[30]](#footnote-30) This lack of clear guidelines, combined with the ‘Unique ethical issues’ presented by the blurred private/public divide,[[31]](#footnote-31) difficulties in maintaining participant anonymity, and difficulties in obtaining informed consent can lead reviews to ‘*err on the side of caution*’.[[32]](#footnote-32) Clearly there is variation in how researchers across the world experience obtaining ethical approval, likely exacerbated by the aforementioned newness of internet technologies and research methods.

In discussing other dimensions of digital ethics, some authors have stressed that a robust approach should interrogate how subjectivity is constructed in research datasets.[[33]](#footnote-33) However this storing of user data in datasets can complicate the traditional identification of subjects, and methods to protect personal data can still leave participants identifiably, making consent and anonymity almost impossible to attain. Metcalf and Crawford stress how precursor disciplines such as data science computer science, applied mathematics and statistics have not historically conducted human-subject research.[[34]](#footnote-34) As with some of the cases outlined above, in many situations researchers are left to rely on the underlying principles and guidelines of general research ethics ‘stemming from shared principles of respect, beneficence, and justice’,[[35]](#footnote-35) as well as principles of informed consent as ‘a general rule’ .[[36]](#footnote-36) One prominent set of ethical guidelines are those produced by the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR). As Ess discusses, in the 2002 first AoIR guidelines ‘primary ethical theories and approaches rested on the assumption that human identity is primarily singular and individual’.[[37]](#footnote-37) However, he stresses how our idea of identity has changed towards a more relational and collective conception. Necessarily the idea of subject protection has to change towards a broader and more inclusive conception of the different relationships (familial, social, natural, and so on) that compose identity. In 2012, AoIR guidelines extended the basic ethical tenets (i.e. fundamental rights of human dignity, autonomy, protection, safety, maximization of benefits and minimization of harms for research subjects) to digital research, at the same time stressing the necessity to maintain a processual and flexible approach.[[38]](#footnote-38) In general, it is recognised that a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach with regard to ethical decision-making is not viable. Researchers have been developing empirical approaches to data collection and reproduction aimed at reducing harms to subjects in research, for example by reconstructing empirical examples, or making required changes in order to maintain the original meaning and message while ensuring the original content cannot be retrieved through searches.[[39]](#footnote-39)

In our view one of the most important aspects, as it has been stressed by Savage and Burrows, boyd and Crawford as well as Andrejevic and others, is the fundamental role of the specific production system where the data are created and collected. Ten years ago, Mike Savage and Roger Burrows argued that the mechanisms of capitalist organisation of society were challenging the empirical methods in sociology.[[40]](#footnote-40) Thanks to digital technologies, research and social data produced and gathered by private actors outside academia were multiplying. They recognized the necessity for a critical methodological approach, a ‘politics of methods’, challenging the collection, use and deployment of social data produced by ‘knowing capitalism’. Despite this, they did not especially explore the ethical implications that follow from critical methodological innovation and research.[[41]](#footnote-41) However, Savage and Burrows raised the point that academic research is now competing with market research, and it is no longer the dominant party when it comes to providing interpretations of society. boyd and Crawford use the concept of ‘ecosystem’ to describe the new set of actors connected to the analysis of digital data and the power relationship that exists between them.[[42]](#footnote-42) Given this, it is increasingly apparent that the technological and economical structure of platforms is the crucial aspect when dealing with digital data in research.

Mark Andrejevic presents a critical account of the economic system where digital data, and Big Data are produced, shared and processed.[[43]](#footnote-43) In particular, Big Data allows the largest amount of information to be available (Andrejevic calls it ‘infoglut’), while data mining and automated processing have become the core tenet of economic, marketing and research methods. In this system, traditional concepts such as anonymity and privacy lose their place, as even though subjects names are anonymised, their information is systematically gathered and stored by automated systems that have interest in profiling groups rather than individuals. Moreover, these systems complicate the reliability of data, as the data we use, especially content data, are data that are created in the specific context of platform capitalism. Platforms’ algorithms curate and edit contents automatically. Recommendations and automated system of curations have built-in priorities that have nothing to do with content, but rather with the response they can get (in terms of likes, retweets…). This may present the risk that researchers who are using data uncritically risk basing their research on data that is unduly influenced by the economic dynamic where it was created.

Based on this, a challenge for critical researchers is to produce valid, ethical research in an ecosystem of capitalist production, while being under pressure from private industry, and ethical regulations that differ from one country to another. One possible approach to this is through the concept ‘accountability’, which can be understood as more encompassing than the concept of privacy protection.[[44]](#footnote-44) As we have outlined above, accountability is not only directed towards the research subject, but also towards the research field in a broader sense. Accountability implies reflecting on the consequences of research related to individuals, organizations and the public sphere, and towards potential shifts in the ecosystem regarding the production, collection and analysis of digital data. What can be a way to improve knowledge and understanding of digital society while fostering an ethical approach towards digital data? How can we make sure that academics avoid harming subjects? and at the same time avoid reinforcing structures of domination/exploitation in our data collection/storage and dissemination? In short, what is ‘good data’ when it comes to critical research? In formulating these questions we are particularly drawing on Staksrud,[[45]](#footnote-45) whose questions for digital social research capture concerns for ethical treatment of participants, as well as a concern for critical and original inquiry. What we find fundamental in ethical assessment of the use of digital data in research is that: Digital social data are generated and circulated within a very specific technological, political, social and above all economic order and, what we do as researchers, the type of data we choose and the methods we use, actively shape, change or re-shape this order.[[46]](#footnote-46)

### A critical approach to ethics

Here we will draw together the work of Antonio Casilli, Christian Fuchs and Karen Gregory, to suggest a critical approach to ethics that considers the economic and political order at the origin of digital social data. These authors share similar perspectives on good data in digital research, stressing the necessity to ground data ethics in a critique of neoliberal economic system and digital labor. We will build on their work to suggest that good data is data conceived in a way that emphasizes the role of the internet in the extension and reproduction of capitalist relations of production and subjectivity, and is used for positive, progressive political and social change through critical, empirical research. The authors (Fuchs, Casilli, Gregory) challenge the positive idea of digital social data and related ideas of ‘participatory culture’, by considering economic and political relations, and seeing social media as capitalist relations of production extended into an online space. Researchers have to contrast the positive rhetoric associated with big data and platforms, helping to raise critical awareness of the issues related to digital social data. In this view, good data are the ones that help pointing out the subordination processes enacted through the platform economy, with the explicit aim of obtaining the recognition of fundamental rights for users, the redistribution of the value extracted by users’ data and the rebalancing of power relations connected to digital technologies. At the same time researchers can reach outside academia and valorize the initiatives of civil society, unions and other movements also by using the very same platform structure for the purpose of creating a democratic programme, based on the idea of commons, abolition of wage labor and private property.[[47]](#footnote-47)

# Data as a product of labor

As we mentioned previously, platforms are elements of global informational capitalism,[[48]](#footnote-48) and serve as an extension of capitalist material processes and tendencies into online spaces and infrastructure.[[49]](#footnote-49) ‘Platformization’ (i.e. the gradual movement of companies towards a platform organisation) is at the origin of the increased amount of digital social data available to academic research.[[50]](#footnote-50) In this system, social media users are essentially configured as laborers, who in their internet use perform different forms of work. Value in platform capitalism is captured and extracted from users’ data.[[51]](#footnote-51) This process is presented as an improvement in the supply of goods and services, either public or private, often instrumentalising concepts such as ‘sharing’, ‘participation’, ‘collaboration’ for commercial purposes. On Facebook the activities that users typically engage in all produce commodities in the form of information, social relationships and social networks.Facebook makes money off of these activities by selling ad space, and through targeted advertising, with users enabling this through the visibility and engagement their interactions generate, and by being the recipients of targeted advertising. These relations extend to other social media platforms: Twitter, YouTube and Google all make their money off of users’ labor in similar ways.

# Ethical problems from this point of view

As mentioned above, Big Data’s nature is quite opaque, and when owned by private companies may be subject to restrictions and suffer from a lack of transparency. Moreover, as stressed by Andrejevic, data do not happen in a vacuum, they are produced within specific technological and economic environment. However, the algorithms that regulate data visibility, extraction and processing are closed for technical and commercial reasons. Digital social data are also at risk of discriminatory practices. Companies have been eroding privacy of users through the massive recovery of information about individuals (e.g. geolocalisation, expenses, health, opinions and behaviours). Cross-referencing users data, companies are able to profile individuals (also non users) into different ‘populations’ in order to direct advertisement and policies. Implicit in this ‘data-veillance’ system is the idea of intrusion, both from public as much as private actors (i.e. state surveillance revealed by Edward Snowden in 2013 and more recently Cambridge Analytica), which can lead to forms of discrimination, making it very easy to penalize individuals for their gender, age, ethnic origin, place of residence or socio-economic status. The rhetoric of choice and entrepreneurialism associated to the use of these platforms hides the social cost connected to these data, costs in terms of exploitation, privacy, and the extreme lack of transparency on their usage.[[52]](#footnote-52) People are said to have a choice, and told that they can improve their opportunities through the use of these platforms, however all activities monetized by platforms are denied the ‘materiality’ as real work, eroding users of their rights, and profoundly enriching transnational companies. Created to parse users into database of population, digital data will never be neutral, as they are with all the concerns connected to the division of population into categories.[[53]](#footnote-53) From this perspective, individual privacy without critique remains part of the neoliberal rhetoric behind digital platforms. Casilli highlights how in this diffuse system of surveillance and extraction of value, privacy can no longer be conceived as an individual, but rather as a collective right. Conceiving privacy as something that an individual can negotiate, contributes to maintain users’ weakness in face of the giant corporations.[[54]](#footnote-54)

# Ethical approach in research

For Fuchs, research ethics is dominated by contradictory positions: on one hand ‘big data positivism’ contends that since social media data is generally public, both in visibility and in the sense that users are not guaranteed privacy by terms and conditions, privacy and ethical concerns can be disregarded. On the other hand, ‘research ethics fundamentalism’ argues that since user intention and the consequences of reproducing data cannot be guaranteed, informed consent should always be sought Fuchs.[[55]](#footnote-55) Clearly, neither is ideal for critical social research, and while some more recent guidelines have recommended that digital scholars ‘neither ignore nor fetishize’ ethics in conducting research, there is a need to develop this position.[[56]](#footnote-56)

# Challenging dominant rhetoric

Researchers have to contrast the positive rhetoric associated to big data and platforms, helping to raise critical awareness of the issues related to digital social data. In this view, good data are the ones that help pointing out the subordination processes enacted through the platform economy, with the explicit aim of obtaining the recognition of fundamental rights for users, the redistribution of the value extracted by users’ data and the rebalancing of power relations connected to digital technologies. At the same time researchers can reach outside academia and valorize the initiatives of civil society, unions and other movements also by using the very same platform structure for the purpose of creating a democratic programme, based on the idea of commons, abolition of wage labor and private property.[[57]](#footnote-57)

# Reflexivity

Drawing from Marx and Engel’s historical materialist method, Gregory presents a critical definition of the work of digital researchers. Intellectual thought, ideas and concepts produced by academic work are themselves a product of the capitalist mode of production and contribute to reproduce the order.[[58]](#footnote-58) For this reason, researchers should engage in a reflexive critique of methods and data, documenting and making more transparent the challenges presented by data created in a capitalist system of production. Against the common practice of omitting the discussions on complications, researchers have to make their methods more transparent, helping to understand how difficulties and obstacles contributed to shape their research. Such a reflexive approach is necessary to realize how we as academics are reproducing the world that we live in. In particular, digital researchers should help developing new political vocabulary, rethinking concepts and developing new methods and tools of analysis to create new models outside the profit-driven logic of the extractive system and move towards anti-racist justice, political, and economic solidarity.[[59]](#footnote-59)

Fuchs’ ‘critical moral real[ist]’[[60]](#footnote-60) approach is useful here. This position argues that since beliefs about the social world are themselves part of the social world, it is entirely appropriate for social scientists to make value judgments about them and to work towards resisting them through research. In the case of critical digital research, this means doing research in a way that works towards ‘participatory democracy, freedom, justice, fairness and equality’,[[61]](#footnote-61) and opposes things that work against those goals. In short, a critical moral realist approach to social media may prioritize the political goal of critique of power over the interests of participants who are reproducing systems of power. Something similar to this position can be found in existing best practice: the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) framework for research ethics stipulates that it may be legitimate to expose research participants to risks, ‘in cases where the objectives of the research are to reveal and critique fundamental economic, political or cultural disadvantage or exploitation’.[[62]](#footnote-62) Even in this case of a major research council suggesting that the emancipatory objectives of research may justify the exposure of participants to risk, ‘Principles of justice’ should still guide researchers to minimise personal harm.[[63]](#footnote-63) As such, critical research should not treat its motivations as carte-blanche justification for potentially harmful or risky practice.

# What is to be done?

We began this chapter by posing questions around how researchers might develop a concept of good data that is rooted in an explicitly critical approach: one that allows for rigorous critical research that is cognizant of ethical issues, and also of the nature of social media as a form of capitalist production. Here, we will draw on the concepts we have discussed in order to address these questions.

In adopting more traditional, subject-oriented perspectives on ethical problems connected to digital data, researchers risk constructing users and data in a way that uncritically reproduces neoliberal approaches, becoming ‘agents’ of the same power system, which is problematic for research that seeks to build foundational critique of digital political economy, subjectivity and ideology online. A critical perspective that situates digital social data within the system of production where the data are produced highlights the exploitation and deep inequalities that are embodied in the data. Personal data online are a lucrative commodity and the basis of an extremely opaque and unequal commercial ecosystem, where users/workers are rarely aware of the different interests connected to them. Critical data scholars, such as Fuchs, Casilli and Gregory stress how data are being employed to produce risky social and economic relations: precarisation of work, data-veillance, profiling, algorithmic management of people.[[64]](#footnote-64)

When working to formulate ethical approaches for critical digital research, both big data positivism and research ethics fundamentalism are especially troubling for critical researchers, as each represents a reproduction of the internal logics and ideology found in corporate social media within social research. In the case of big data positivism, users’ data is seen as something unambiguously open, something that a user has agreed to forfeit control over by agreeing to terms and conditions, with the only controlling party being the platforms who own said data. The consequence of this logic is best seen in the emerging controversy around the data analytics company Cambridge Analytica. In March 2018, the Guardian and the New York Times published a series of articles that allege the misuse of a huge amount of user data taken from Facebook by a political influence/analytics firm called Cambridge Analytica. The story acquired attention because Cambridge Analytica had important relationships with some of Donald Trump’s closest collaborators, especially during the 2016 US election campaign. The case has brought to the attention of the large public how data-veillance capitalism operates, confirming the fact that the vast majority of platforms’ users are totally unaware of how their data are monetized and used to influence policies. On the one hand, the case indicates that the rhetoric of individual privacy, stressed for long time by platforms (i.e. ‘Facebook users have control of their privacy’ option) is a cover for the extraction of value from users’ and also non-users data (i.e. profiles and shadow profiles). It is also significant that the resulting scrutiny from the press and public is not confined to Cambridge Analytica, but as it develops seems to be expanding to Facebook itself, and how it handles users’ data.

The case is useful to stress the necessity of being critical of accepting the meanings associated with digital data. Digital social data acquire their ‘goodness’ from the moment we use them not only as indicators of social reality, but also as a means to start questioning the image of society they present as a part of the political and economic system from where they derive.

Applying critical perspectives to digital social data means challenging the real significance of big data metrics and analytics as the product of the specific ecosystem at the origin of digital social data. The social implication of metadata fields structure what is described and what is excluded, and the social categories that are created/reinforced or reproduced. For instance, the most used metadata in academic research are those connected to tweets. Twitter’s data includes information about users’ accounts names, followers, connections (retweets, replies) location, content, devices.[[65]](#footnote-65) But how are these categories really experienced by users as bodied people? Adopting the number of followers (or retweets) as a measure of influence for instance, are we really measuring a social variable or are we rather describing the results of platforms’ internal logic of profit?[[66]](#footnote-66) Asking these questions force us to recognize the power struggles behind the data we scrape or download.

Likewise, research ethics fundamentalist positions are troubling to critical scholarship. As Fuchs argues, approaches to research ethics that fetishize privacy and ethics do so without regard for wider social issues that may be pertinent to the data being studied,[[67]](#footnote-67) for example by serving as protection for users engaging in the reproduction of hateful discourses.[[68]](#footnote-68) We argue that this position serves to reproduce a kind of neoliberal subjectivity in how we construct research participants, by constructing the social media user as someone who has complete sovereign ownership of their data, of all data being private, of all use of data being subject to some kind of individualistic consent, regardless of what is being studied. In a situation where access to socially relevant data is often predicated on amicable relations between researchers and corporate social media platforms, critical researchers should take great care that we do not reproduce the kind of subjectivities and logics of ethics and methodology that grow from the ideologies found in the social media industry.

In discussing the privacy fundamentalism, Fuchs presents the following question a researcher might ask a potential participant: ‘“Dear Mr. Misogynist/Nazi, I am a social researcher gathering data from Twitter. Can you please give me the informed consent that I quote your violent threat against X?”’.[[69]](#footnote-69) This scenario may seem ridiculous, but in our personal experience is exceedingly accurate in describing the logical consequences of trying to do critical research. For one of us, critical discursive analysis of misogynistic, anti-feminist and sexist language on Twitter has been the primary focus of their research during their postgraduate education, and the above is broadly indicative of the situation they found themself in when fulfilling the conditions of their ethical approval.[[70]](#footnote-70) While the institutional ethical standards applies to that project were not quite as extreme as the positions outlined by Fuchs, they still required that informative consent be obtained from participants who produced more serious and abusive content. While the motivation behind this is an ostensible concern for the potential consequences to participants’ welfare of reproducing their data in another context, the effect was that ‘the very act of producing hateful discourse is turned into a barrier to the scrutiny of this discourse’.[[71]](#footnote-71) From a critical perspective, this has the perverse consequence of protecting and privileging those users who produce the most extreme discourse, over those who would be the potential or actual targets. Although this is not necessarily representative of the ethical standards applied to all digital social research, it is still an example of how a particular interpretation of ethical standards can act as a barrier to critical scrutiny.

# Conclusions

In this chapter we discussed the argument for a critical approach to ethics based on digital labor studies, in order to advocate for what we see as truly good data. The focus on the link between digital social data and the economic and technical environment where they are produced labor is fundamental: big data are not ‘just’ data, they are labor, they are political representation of the world, produced within a specific system of material relations. We advocate for a view of data that grows from this, one that calls critical researchers to reflect on how they are not simply accountable to their participants as individualized,[[72]](#footnote-72) neoliberal subjects, but accountable to the largest set of relationships that compose contemporary concept of identity. As boyd and Crawford and Ess suggest a form of accountability that move beyond the single individual, we argue that the real ethical position of researcher is to be accountable towards the commons, as a specific alternative to the neoliberal capitalist system of production of data. As critical researchers we have a unique opportunity to occupy the emerging field of digital studies, and counter the rhetoric of reproduction of neoliberal approaches to data, methods and subjectivity, such as participation, entrepreneurialism and individualism. Such approaches are already ubiquitous in the social media and data analytics industries, and while the apparent greater concern for the ethical use of user data expressed in academia is undoubtedly an improvement over the bleak cynicism of big data capitalism, these approaches cannot hope to fundamentally challenge industry unless they problematize the basic assumptions of what makes good data. As we have discussed above, such an alternative - one that identifies social media as a form of capitalist production - would require a critical materialist reading of relations of production on social media, as well as fundamental changes in approaches to subjectivity, and a new approach to research ethics that builds on these ideas, with the intention of empowering critical research to target how systems of domination, exploitation and hate are propagated on social media and through the relations of production that underline it. If critical researchers are going to advance a challenge to the ideology, assumptions and relations of production advanced under digital capitalism, they must develop a way of ethically working with user data that is based on achieving these goals. Away from perspectives that treat data as something uncomplicated, or unsuitable for use in critique, and towards good data: data that can be used to affect meaningful change at the edge of modern capitalism.

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