**The Allure of Big Data**

**Techniques of abstraction: big data in an ecology of practices**

Revolutionary claims made on behalf of big data follow a pattern that, under conditions of the rapid transformation of modern sciences and other knowledge practices into a knowledge economy, has become statistically predictable. Indeed, tales of paradigm shifts in the way knowledge is produced have formed a feature of the rhetorical code of modern science that has become increasingly executable in recent years.

And yet for all the fanfare, much of what might be done using big data looks pretty much like business as usual - the transformation of marketing into “analytics”, intensified citizen surveillance, the automation of the workplace, and so on. A new set of expertises, a new set of challenges to what passes for “democratic” accountability and control, a new round of hype and a panicked rush to ensure that machines learn to recognise a future that is in smooth continuity with the values and criteria for knowing them that dominate the present.

The constitution of the ‘data’ in big data require further inspection - voluminous quantities of consumer transactions, the traces of regular and growing use of the limited actionable array of preferences designed into social media, the actuarial data of insurance or the results of open ended processes rather than delimited problems: in many respects big data presents us with a structurally nuanced set of traces of the greyly bureaucratic weft of contemporary social life. As such, one might imagine that it is scarcely something that is likely offer a more anthropologically comprehensive or extensive picture of social relations. In this respect, the precipitous haste of social scientists to turn to big data is all the more surprising.

Drawing on ongoing research into the practices of online code repositories, the big data technologies that enable them to be interrogated (albeit in very particular ways), on a sustained consideration of the complex relations between the “epistemological” and the “technical” and the sometimes contestable assumptions made about the kind of knowledge big data can generate, this paper will endeavour to develop a constructively critical account of the practices, problems, and possibilities that the socio-technical “assemblages” of big data practices require, generate and afford (respectively). Treating big data not as a thing, but as the assembled traces of a complex ecology of practices allows us to pose the contingent - and hence conceivably political - question of how it might be appropriated, in ways that might not reproduce the problematic assumptions programmed in to its techno-scientific starting point. We suggest some ways in which the abstractions at work might be imagined differently.

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