

206a Week 1 Reading Assignment

Link: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-09-14/mapping-the-wildfire-smoke-choking-the-western-u-s>

The article highlights how ordinary people are using the data saved by their personal PurpleAir air pollution monitors to track air quality in their local surroundings while wildfire smoke chokes the west coast. Though the data is not as accurate as official readings from the EPA, it updates more often and has better coverage in many areas. As of mid-September when the article was published, over 9,000 of the monitors (most belonging to regular individuals) contribute to the publicly-accessible PurpleAir map. Citizen scientists play with the PurpleAir data in GitHub repositories and connect through a Facebook group. In the current wildfire situation, people are using the information to help them make health decisions like when to go for a walk or where the cleaner air is inside the house. However, there is a gap in the data for poorer communities because there are more air monitors in wealthier, whiter areas.

The subject matter of this article was interesting to me because I am currently conducting research for a UCLA architecture studio on adapting to wildfire. I think being able to track air quality at a minute level, such as within different places of a house or different houses on a block, can present good information for planners and architects to understand how our built form can protect people from smoke exposure. On a personal level, my apartment directly fronts Venice Boulevard. If I had a PurpleAir monitor it would surely indicate that my air quality is worse than the units located off the street. Perhaps if the City had access to this kind of granular information, it could influence the creation of pollution screening regulations for buildings. The approach to data in this article was also interesting because it showed how the data from our personal and home devices can be used for something constructive. I often feel like my personal devices just mine me for data all day and I don't have any control over it; however, this article provides an example of people using the data they produced to empower themselves. The article did a good job highlighting how people of different backgrounds come together to tinker with data.