

## **Datafication unmasked 2.** ***Mythologies***

In the last article, I have outlined how social reality is transformed into online, heavily quantified and tracked data in a process called datafication. Disguised as impartial and undebatable social knowledge, this process is framed and maintained, at a discursive level, from the so-called “myth of big data”.

The myth of big data naturalises the processes of privatisation and commodification that bits of human data undergo in the digital realm. This myth fortifies the belief that data provides social knowledge, rationalising this information gathering process at the expense of other possibly imaginable ways of enacting the social.

Displaying an ecological approach to the media landscape, disciplines such as media studies, communication sciences, anthropology, and sociology, attempt at discerning what this mythology conceals.

The digital sphere is, according to this theoretical corpus, seen and treated as *terra nullius* (Couldry and Mejias, 2020). All available data constitutes raw material, destined to be processed into predictive algorithms. Presenting a geo-extractivist metaphor, this dynamic of information gathering is described as mining (van Dijck, 2014), an extraction of “natural” resources in a digital environment.

Shifting the focus from the digital users to the overall ecosystem, scholars unmask a narrative at play for centuries. Just as imperial powers justified geographical expansion and the exploitation of the colonised as a superior civilising mission, the myth of big data legitimises datafication as an overall scientific, rational-led conquest for society (Couldry and Mejias, 2020).

### **The risks of datafication**

Datafication fortifies the rationalisation of users’ activities and information, and consequently their exploitation as mere commodified data subjects (Calzati, 2020). As Milan and Tréré write, datafication becomes a tool for those businesses that profit from managing people (2019): big data is the means through which corporations, and increasingly the State, acquire exploitable knowledge on people (Couldry, 2014).

A term comes to mind (and essays): biopolitics, a neologism famously coined by Foucault. It indicates a political rationality directed to the administration of life and populations, with the aim of ordering them through specific regulations and precise control (Foucault, 1976).

Digital users and media scholars expose the imposition from above (in a schema of social statuses and powers) of a biopolitical control over the data, and consequently over the

bodies. And as bodies come with lived experiences, this control cascades onto people's actions and social lives, moulded into quantified pieces of information aimed at responding to the economic interests of a group of private and governmental actors.

The efforts that governmental bodies and corporations enact to maximize surveillance and biopolitical control over populations are leading scholars to even discuss "digital biopolitics", to accentuate the intensifying implementation of digital technologies (Waisbord and Segura, 2021).

How can we reconcile our appreciation for technology, resist the myth? In the next article, I'll oppose different epistemologies, bringing forward further scholar critique to big data and the resistance that stems.

### Consulted resources

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