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REVIEWS

Review of Luci Pangrazio and Neil Selwyn (2023). *Critical Data Literacies: Rethinking Data and Everyday Life*

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Introduction

In their new book, *Critical Data Literacies: Rethinking Data and Everyday Life* (2023), Luci Pangrazio and Neil Selwyn take on an ambitious task. Their book is a hands-on manual for working critically with data, or even more, a guidebook into living in a world where everything gets turned into data. The book leads us to the central problem areas around data and then moves on to develop a practical model for what the authors call Critical Data Literacy. Pangrazio and Selwyn (2023) acknowledge the common difficulties in critical data research and offer a thorough reading of the questions that many researchers sharing this field are all too familiar with. For many, a central question is undoubtedly: Why should I be concerned about data? The consequences and potential downsides of producing and using data are uncertain and experienced in the future. Those who get to speak about data are typically the ones who benefit most from it. In their hands, data becomes a dry technical matter that offers endless possibilities for fine-tuning our lives into something more efficient and enjoyable.

In our daily lives, data is simultaneously everywhere and still curiously absent. While we know that vast amounts of data are being collected from our activities, opinions, habits, and interactions, it remains abstract and hard to contextualize. In this sense, there are parallels with phenomena like the climate crisis which, for some, seems to be too far and too abstract to invite action now. Through their own extensive research experience, Pangrazio and Selwyn are aware of this. Therefore, they set out to bring data back to our everyday experiences and to dismiss data as an abstract category that is vaguely floating around the web, instead bringing it back into contexts and seeing it entangled in the concrete events it is part of and produces.

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In light of recurring privacy issues and a general mistrust toward tech actors, it is worth asking whether anyone actually remains hopeful about data these days? Data is increasingly seen more as a threat than a potential for a better life. Nevertheless, the authors do wish to find ways to build better futures with data and not only abolish data and data analytics. They borrow Morozov's idea of doing technology criticism more in the vein of literary criticism. This entails 'a willingness to be surprised' and the idea that technology is important enough to merit critique (Pangrazio and Selwyn 2023: 23).

Data Problems

From the three prologue cases introducing ways in which data practices are present in our lives, the book seeks to capture a multitude of contemporary data practices and to show that the question is not only about highly educated professionals engaging in knowledge work. The echoes of data-driven platform capitalism can be seen on factory and warehouse floors, connected home appliances, and school entrance exams. This approach serves to dismantle data activism as a privileged club that has often reproduced already existing class boundaries (Crooks and Currie 2021). One of the goals of the book (Pangrazio and Selwyn 2023) is to bring data down from the pedestal it has been placed on. The authors show that data is actually a lot less capable than people singing its praises claim and, simultaneously, still powerful.

One paradox in the promises of datafied life is that despite all its possibilities, data is often not opening worlds but closing them and turning us back onto ourselves. The mission, therefore, is to use data to lead us to others, to use it to build something common and shared. The approach Pangrazio and Selwyn (2023) choose comes from the new literacies tradition and seeks to emphasize and develop the capabilities of people for making sense of the everyday texts and cultural events surrounding them. One way of putting it is treating data more like a text. This is a great move, for we have been told so many times that data is so much more than text. The book asks: What happens if we stop treating it that way? Approaching data as text helps to peel away some of its magical sheen and make it less special and less powerful. Through a wide variety of cases, the authors show how data actually is a lot less capable than marketing slogans lead us to believe. The language around data is revealing: the dream of 'cleaning' data speaks of a fundamental mismatch between data and life.

How would one react to the idea of a clean life or a clean text? While these sound inherently suspicious and even dangerous, cleaning up data is considered an everyday practice. Through the simple move of treating data more like text, Pangrazio and Selwyn (2023) make visible many presuppositions hiding behind data. As Jathan Sadowski (2020) writes, there is no raw data—it is always manufactured and a result of choices. Thinking of data as text helps to drive this point. In the same way, we cannot return to raw text to find its original essence—since raw text is only material which has to be reworked over and over again in order to become the finished article—raw data is not necessarily the place where truths can be found. There is only material to be interpreted, or as the authors quote Geoffrey Bowker (2005): 'Raw data is both an oxymoron and a bad idea; to the contrary, data should be cooked with care.'

One of the paradoxes of data is that in the popular imagery and marketing speech it is presented as accurate and personal, as something that has the potential of providing insight into ourselves. However, as Pangrazio and Selwyn (2023: Chap 6) point out, already a rudimentary list of commonly visited web pages is enough to create a functioning advertising profile for a person. The insight data provides is often shallow. We are all familiar with situations where the data is not good. The data that is supposed to be an in-depth look into the most relevant parts of our personalities can instead be a random collection of data points that were available, meaningful or not. What is truly fascinating is that this does not stop us from acting as if the data was an accurate reflection. Data does not have to be good to be powerful (Paakkari et al. 2023). One of the fascinating things around data use is our continuing high tolerance for bad or broken data (Pink et al. 2018). Imagine having a discussion with a friend who repeatedly summarizes every detail back to you slightly inaccurately so that you have to constantly correct them. We would quickly run out of patience. However, when it comes to technical systems, we seem to have endless flexibility and eagerness for granting them yet another opportunity of producing a slightly better data image of ourselves. As Pangrazio and Selwyn (2023) point out, the accuracy of data does not seem to matter all that much, which really is surprising considering the promises of personalized data.

Why are we so flexible with regard to how we are represented by data? One possible suggestion is that data has been established and normalized as one of the ways of becoming a subject in the contemporary world. As communities, traditions, and norms lose some of their power of telling people who they are, data emerges as a way of being seen, as a reflection of what I really am. Perhaps one place where the atomistic subject of late capitalism can turn to in looking for stability is data, which then becomes a foundation for a data subject. As a child whose relationship with a bad parent is fraught with controversy, so is our relationship with data that tells us who we are, even if we are really something else.

Toward Critical Data Literacies

After Pangrazio and Selwyn (2023) have laid out the issues surrounding data and the problems facing responses to datafication, they turn to introducing Critical Data Literacies as a proposal for a new approach to data. It is a model that consists of five steps that are expanded in the latter half of the book. As mentioned earlier, the idea that resonated most with me is to not only borrow tools from the critical literacies approach but to approach data as text. The tradition of literacy research puts emphasis on the ways people use and interpret their everyday cultures (Luke 2000; Pangrazio and Sefton-Green 2020). Literacy traditions emphasize that there is no single right way of being but that people are constantly reinventing their everyday practices.

The proposed model for Critical Data Literacies is divided into five distinct steps. Data Identification is about recognizing where and how data originates. Data Understandings investigates the potential uses of data. Data Reflexivity looks at the consequences of data. Taking inspiration from De Certeau's (1984)

division of strategies and tactics, the last two steps are labeled Data Strategies and Data Tactics. As the authors point out, the so-called data strategies are something that 'all people are ostensibly free to pursue' (Pangrazio and Selwyn 2023: 137). One can read user agreements carefully and adjust privacy settings but the limit of these actions is that they remain firmly in the realm of choices pre-inscribed by technology companies and government institutions. Taking data out of its comfort zone and using it to build new worlds often requires something else and falls under what the authors call Data Tactics. These are resistance practices that seek to subvert and disrupt dominant forms of data generation, and that range from data cooperatives and data jamming to disobedience and protests.

A lot has been written about the problems with data literacy and data activism (Benjamin 2019; Crooks and Currie 2021; Smit et al. 2024). The obvious challenge of these writings is that they easily drift on to a liberal-individualistic territory and turn into another skillset for the enterprise of the modern self. Besides the limitations and inefficacy of individualism, the endless responsibilization of the self can lead to despair and hopelessness. The task of Pangrazio and Selwyn (2023), therefore, is to find practices that do not only operate on an individual level but can find a shared communal aspect in data and develop new ways of seeing and using data as something that is common.

Thinking about data as text opens up interesting possibilities. It displaces data as something mysterious and out of reach, grounds it back to earth. Suddenly data can be thought of as a collection of numbers and words—on a basic level, ones and zeros—that is sometimes accurate and informative, and sometimes not. As Pangrazio and Selwyn (2023) write in the beginning of Chapter 6, it also opens up the question of who is allowed to write *with* data. Again, seeing data as text makes it more approachable and inserts the human back into datafication processes.

Data as Common

One of the most enjoyable aspects of this book is the authors' refusal to see data as an isolated and abstract phenomenon. Pangrazio and Selwyn (2023) emphasize the need to always contextualize data and see it as a part of larger social formations. As a reader, it is tempting to think about the aspects of data in conjunction with recent developments of capitalism. In this way, the mission is fundamentally materialistic. It is also tempting to read it side-by-side with Deleuze's (2007) concept of the virtual, which aims at situating the realm of possible inside the world. Whereas the Aristotelian dichotomy of potential-actual situates the possible as either something that is not real, or is real but outside of this world (as classical philosophers of Christianity claimed), Deleuze (2007) introduces virtual as a way of showing that the seeds of change and different ways of being are already present in this world, just waiting to be actualized. What is here now is one actualized version of the virtual field, but there are always possibilities of

other actualizations. Therefore, we can ask: if data is an actualization of a virtual field, what is this field and how else could it be actualized?

In an essay on Søren Kierkegaard's typology of despair, Finnish philosopher and translator Eetu Viren (2023) writes about what Kierkegaard calls a 'despair of weakness'. Asking what Kierkegaard's classifications could tell us about the affective economies of contemporary capitalism, Viren identifies a particular brand of 'meta despair' that is increasingly typical among highly educated and liberal-identifying urban professionals. It involves attempting to excel at everything: build a great career, solve the climate crisis, and make the world a better place. However, this attempt is undermined by an ever-present feeling of insufficiency and failure which, according to Viren, is quite typical for the precariat that is left wandering in the seemingly limitless space and time of contemporary capitalism. On an individual level, this leads to an endless circle of self-development, attempting to become 'more conscious and spontaneous and less of an isolated individual' (Viren 2023: 180). However, this attempt always fails, since the conditions imposed by the capitalist system cannot be overcome alone.

Viren's (2023) point is that the feeling of despair can only be overcome when it is shared collectively with others. We must therefore start by overturning the fiction that it is an individual affect. It is tempting to read Pangrazio and Selwyn (2023) in the same vein. Their most powerful invention is that data is not actually individual or personal. It is something that the current mode of economic order and the logic of platform capitalism impose on us. In order to make sense of the data or to read it against the grain, it must be turned into something else, into something common and collective.

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