Between Data Capitalism and Data Citizenship

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Abstract

We discuss two points raised by the articles in this special issue, which are related to our previous work on media movements in Latin America. First, we analyze the dimensions of data activism in the region. Recent experiences in Latin America suggest two types of data activism differentiated by goals and spheres of action: social data activism and data rights activism. They also have diverse tactics and achievements. Second, we discuss the Global South as the site of counter-epistemic and alternative practices, and we wonder whether the concept of "data colonialism" adequately captures the dynamics of the digital society in areas of well-entrenched digital divides. We argue that datafication and the opposition to datafication in the South does not develop exactly as in the North given huge political, economic, social, and technological differences in the context of the expansion of digital capitalism.

The articles in this special issue offer a snapshot of two contradictory forces in contemporary digital societies: (1) data extractivism and surveillance driven by corporations and states and (2) the possibilities for citizens' resistance and autonomy in late capitalism. Altogether, they make a persuasive argument to study these forces in the Global South to challenge and refine arguments and conclusions in the literature, which is largely based on experiences and analytical frameworks in the North.

On one hand, there are plenty of worrisome signs: the consolidation of the digital knowledge infrastructure designed to further commodify personal data and to control

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populations, the unchecked power of corporations in complicity with governments in the collection and the use of data about citizens, the ubiquity of mechanisms that turn citizens into datafied subjects, and the reproduction of social injustice through new forms of digital capitalism. These developments demonstrate that digital society represents the continuation of capitalism's insatiable search for markets and labor, as well as the control of populations. Digitalism as the triumph of individual freedom and global community, a common trope of corporate communications, reveals an ideological construction that masks a grim reality. Under the logic of digital capitalism, populations are trackable, monitored, commodified, and subjected to the pervasive power of corporate greed and state surveillance.

On the other hand, there are signs of resistance represented by an array of collective actions and organized movements that challenge techno-corporate rationality and dataveillance. They offer alternative modes of digital engagement, with the goal of promoting citizenship over control, transparency over opacity, and accountability over unlimited power. They bring a counter-epistemic approach that believes data activism is necessary to document and resolve social problems, reveal and denounce corporate and state violations of human privacy, and promote public policies grounded in the notion of digital rights that curb the power of corporate giants and governments. Data activism refers to a heterogeneous set of actions and groups intended to re-appropriate digital technologies and data for human rights.

Altogether, the articles correctly warn us about drawing one-sided conclusions that focus either on domination or resistance in the digital society. We should avoid fatalistic accounts that interpret digitalization simply as another triumph of capitalism as well as optimistic conclusions about the prospects for the emancipatory uses of data. What is needed is a sober analysis, equally mindful of new forms of control as well as forms of resistance and social change. Also, it is important to develop and clarify the contributions of Southern studies and perspectives to the study of data capitalism and data citizenship.

Our interest here is to discuss two points raised by the articles, which are related to our previous work on media movements in Latin America (Segura and Waisbord 2016): the dimensions of data activism and the Global South as the site of counter-epistemic and alternative practices.

The Dimensions of Latin American Data Activism

Data activism is one of the most remarkable and promising forms of digital citizenship. Just like hacktivism, statactivism, and information politics, data activism is a form of digital collective action. It politically uses technical expertise and online action to promote more egalitarian access and management of data, engages with new forms of information and knowledge production, and challenges dominant understandings of datafication (Milan and van der Velden 2016).

Recent experiences in Latin America suggest two types of data activism differentiated by goals and spheres of action.

One type of data activism uses various tactics, including data harvesting, data advocacy, and data-grounded reasoning, for social change. These tactics are used to document social problems, foster public awareness, and promote solutions in relation to a range of issues, such as environmental disasters, police violence, femicides, and other human rights abuses. This type of data activism combines different competencies such as data science, scientific research, and data journalism (Gutiérrez 2018). Its main contribution is to produce knowledgeable realities that are either manipulated and rendered invisible by powerful actors (e.g,. corporations, security forces, and death squads) and structural forces (e.g., racism and misogyny). Social data activism includes various forms of organization: online mobilization, brick-and-mortar nongovernment organizations, and hybrids of offline and online activities. Examples include actions to combat gender-based violence in Argentina and Mexico, discussed in this issue by Chenou and Cepea-Masmela, and by Ricaurte, and the Montevideo-based Latin American Initiative for Open Data (*Iniciativa Latinoamericana por los Datos Abiertos*) that links academics, civil society organizations (CSOs), and decision makers in the production of research and the development of tools and methodologies for the use of open data in areas such as gender and health.

A different type of data activism is represented by social movements that promote rights-based public policies regarding data production, protection, and management, and aim to regulate data extractivism by corporations and states. Their actions are analogous to media movements that championed communication rights in relation to broadcasting policies during the past decades (Segura and Waisbord 2016). This kind of data activism clearly continues this tradition of communication and cultural rights to make demands and propose policies in the digital society. Its normative framework is similarly grounded in a rights-based conception of communication that defends access, diversity, participation, and equity.

Data rights activism in Latin America works on four areas. The first area of intervention is access to digital cultural goods to ensure free access and curb the commodification of cultural goods. Another area covers the preservation of digital cultural goods and heritage. A third area is improving access to public information. The fourth area is the protection of civil rights on the Internet, such as the right to privacy, the right to preserve personal data, and the right to be forgotten against the intrusion of states and corporations.

To achieve these goals, data activists have developed a broad set of tactics, from data engagement to resisting massive data collection (Milan and van der Velden 2016). They have also tried to influence states and corporations to reform data policies. CSOs working on free access to digital cultural goods have used several strategies. They collaborate in the production of free knowledge as Wikimedia Foundation that has chapters in Latin American countries and host Wikipedia (the free online encyclopedia created and edited by volunteers around the world) and Wikicommons (the world's largest free-to-use library of photos, illustrations, drawings, videos, and music). They also develop free and open software, such as the work by the regional chapters of Free Software Foundation. They promote alternatives to conventional copyright legislation

by expanding the range of creative works available for open sharing and allowing authors to decide the limits of use and exploitation of their work on the Internet, as illustrated by the local activities of Creative Commons International. Also, they digitalize and publish books online, such as the Argentine Bibliohack Project that develops low-cost scanners and materials with open resources available on the Internet, uses free collection management systems, and encourages the creation of collaborative institutional networks for preserving cultural heritage.

Data activism also enable file conservation of web pages and software as cultural heritage of humanity. Nonetheless, some populations claim their right to be disconnected to preserve their cultures from market abuses. For example, some indigenous groups refuse to digitalize crafts and fabrics to prevent corporate theft.

Data activism aimed at improving public access to government and corporate data uses various tactics. Some organizations generate original data in a collaborative manner, such as the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists that produced the Panama Papers, in which many Latin American journalists participated. Also, fact-checking organizations produce data to monitor public discourse, such as *Chequeado* in Argentina, UYCheck in Uruguay or *El Observador* in Honduras, and several fact-checking projects during recent electoral campaigns in Costa Rica, Colombia, Brazil, and Mexico.

Finally, CSOs like Argentina's *Fundación Vía Libre* and *Asociación por los Derechos Civiles*, and the regional chapters of Article 19 advocate for the protection of civil rights on the Internet through the production of information, the promotion of public debate, the drafting of policy proposals and congressional bills, and the use of strategic litigation as well as administrative and judicial mechanisms to enforce the application of rights.

Data activism has contributed to expanding the legal recognition of data rights. CSOs participated in the process that resulted in the passing of recent legislation in various countries: the 2014 Marco Civil da Internet in Brazil that protects civil rights, the 2013 Digital Institutional Open Access Repositories Law in Argentina that guarantees public access to academic knowledge, and the 2014 Free Software and Open Format Law in Uruguay that promotes the use of free software in the country. They have also contributed to open data policies, such as Mexico's National Digital Strategy and Ecuador's open software, and to the legal recognition of the priority of the right to communicate on the Internet over prior censorship, such as the decision by the Argentine justice to declare not guilty the founders of the website *Taringa!* accused of violation of intellectual property.

Rethinking Data Capitalism and Citizenship in/from the South

The persistence of digital inequalities in Latin America, and arguably in much of the Global South, reminds us that capitalism is not similarly interested in the datafication of all social groups, whether for commercial or political goals. In Latin America, 54.4 percent of the population used the Internet, and 43.4 percent of households were

connected to the Internet in the region in 2015. There has been a slow but steady improvement compared with previous years, largely due to increased affordability and public policies to extend services. While the cost of fixed broadband service of 1 Mbps was about 18 percent of average monthly income, it dropped to 2 percent in 2015. Nonetheless, there are inequalities in access by geographical location (urban/rural) and socioeconomic condition. The expansion of Internet access has been concentrated on better-off social groups thereby further widening the social gap (Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL) 2016). In summary, the persistent lack of (quality) digital access in broad swaths in the region, where almost half of the population has no Internet access, reflects deep-seated problems and the persistent exclusion of already socially marginalized populations from the digital society. Several CSOs have worked to overcome digital inequalities, such as community Internet networks like Altermundi and *Atalaya Sur* in Argentina, Coolab in Brazil, Rhizomática and *Telecomunicaciones Indígenas Comunitarias* in Mexico, and e-waste recycling projects like *Computadores para Educar* in Colombia that generate jobs, contribute to a sustainable e-waste management, and redistribute equipment.

Digital exclusion confirms capitalism's selective interest in creating markets and exploiting labor. Not every population is equally attractive to capital. A totalizing push for data extractivism, driven either by corporate expansionism or state policies, would have improved digital access. However, just like previous forms of capitalism, digital capitalism selectively targets publics while completely ignoring others. It is not equally driven to monitor, track, and commoditize all populations. In a region with historically entrenched, abysmal levels of social inequality, digital exclusion is another form of social marginalization.

Given these structural inequalities, we wonder about whether the concept of "data colonialism" adequately captures the dynamics of the digital society in areas of well-entrenched digital divides. In their articles, Couldry and Mejias, Mann and Daly, and Arora use "colonialism" to characterize current trends in data capitalism. Certainly, Latin America is no exception to the goal of digital corporations to produce datafied subjects. "Data colonialism," however, unnecessarily muddles the analysis. It diminishes the centrality of violence in colonialism. Put it simply, colonialism is unthinkable without violence—the takeover of lands and populations by sheer physical force. Similar to colonialism, data capitalism denies populations their humanity by turning them resources and value-creating subjects. It does not, however, employ force the way colonialism did. Data capitalism uses insidious and duplicitous techniques to extract value, but its tactics are not backed up by standing armies and slavery. Certainly, Couldry and Mejias affirm that they do not intend "to make loose analogies to the content or form, let alone the physical violence, of historical colonialism" (2019, 339). Yet it seems difficult to use "colonialism" and leave out violence. In fact, their reference to the Spanish empire's *Requerimiento* as analogous to the "terms of service" of digital companies stretches the comparison too far. The religious conquest was a core component of colonialism in the Americas and the enslavement of indigenous populations. Religious conversion was not simply an option the way digital giants offer rules of engagement that follow standard legal corporate procedures. So, although data

capitalism aims to extract value, it does not use colonialist methods. Other concepts, such as "data extractivism," "data exploitation," and "dataveillance" (Van Dijck 2014) correctly describe the processes of exploitation and subjectification.

Another important issue worth exploring is that data capitalism in the Global South should not be seen simply as a prolongation of similar extractivist policies in the North, but rather, as a process with its own particularities in different regions and countries (see also Milan and Treré 2019). In Latin America, for example, the politics of data surveillance work differently than in the United States and other Western countries insofar as states historically did not develop massive, effective large-scale operations for gathering, analyzing, and managing data about populations during the past half century. Data capitalism in the North builds off an extensive information infrastructure and long-standing, well-established relations between telecommunication and digital corporations and the state. Despite a tradition of policing populations, and even if some states in the region have incorporated dataveillance technologies in recent years, there have been no similar ambitious state projects of data assemblage, driven by various goals: social welfare policies, military build-up, geopolitical designs, and intelligence operations. Therefore, Latin American states did not produce the massive information and technological infrastructure during the past half century that set the basis for contemporary dataveillance in the Global North, nor is there a well-developed tradition of corporate accumulation of consumer information and quantification. Thus, a fine-toothed combed analysis is needed to examine the historical development of data capitalism in specific regions in the Global South.

Just as data capitalism developed differently, it is also necessary to examine the politics of data citizenship by foregrounding unique characteristics in the Global South. We fully share the core idea of this special issue: the need to take a skeptical, probing approach to universalist generalizations drawn from cases in the North, as Arora eloquently calls for. We agree with Milan and Treré (2017) that it is important to study experiences of "resistance, subversion and creativity as responses to situations of marginalization of various kinds" in the Global South.

We want to caution, however, about two potential pitfalls. One problem is falling into essentialist positions about "the South" (or the North for that matter) in the analysis of data capitalism and data citizenship. Data capitalism, as Couldry and Mejias (2019) rightly recognize, involves dynamics that transcend the traditional North-South divide, especially, we add, in a multipolar world where state-corporate alliances in the United States, Russia, and China compete for global military, technological, and commercial supremacy. The South, in its staggering complexity and diversity, is not only a space for confrontation and alternative data politics or the counterweight to Western capitalism. Rather, as the politics of digital capitalism and digital citizenship show, it comprises contradictory forces: control and resistance, domination and citizenship, capitalism and human development.

Another potential problem is to assume that data citizenship in the South is necessarily different than in the North. Not all forms of data activism are grounded in a de(post)colonial rationality that challenges Western forms of knowledge. Counter-epistemic activism is not bounded by political geography or particular socio-histories,

even if it is steeped in local cultures of knowledge and focuses on specific domestic concerns. Data activism in Latin America citizenship is inspired by progressive legal frameworks as well as political principles grounded in Western traditions as well as regional traditions of mobilization and knowledge production. Its rights-based perspective on a range of issues related to data production, management, and access are firmly grounded in international legislation, which has resulted from ethical traditions and political processes in Europe and the United States. Also, data activism deploys mobilization tactics that are not completely different from the ones used by similar movements in the North. Many Latin American data activism organizations are national chapters of international CSOs and are part of international alliances that emerged in the past two decades. Data activism represents a hybridization of perspectives, organization forms, and tactics: it is mindful of local problems and conditions and open to borrowing positions and tactics from other regions of the world. It is rather omnivore in its choice of philosophical frameworks as well as political strategies to use data to promote social change and to advocate for information policies. In fact, just like other media movements in Latin America, current forms of data citizenship straddle different political and legal traditions as they confront local and global aspects of data capitalism. A specific regional alternative practice and counter-epistemic theory could be developed in the future when Latin American indigenous, rural, and popular sectors also have broader Internet access.

In closing, Milan and Treré (2019) are right that datafication (and we would add the opposition to datafication) in the South does not develop exactly as in the North. It would have been surprising if it did, given huge political, economic, social, and technological differences in the context of the expansion of digital capitalism. This is why concepts and conclusions about the process of data capitalism and citizenship in the North need to be approached gingerly. Also, we need to carefully examine experiences in the South in support of control and emancipation, and to be cognizant of particularities and continuities.

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