Book Review: Digital Citizenship in a Datafied Society

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Digital Citizenship in a Datafied Society. Arne Hintz, Lina Dencik & Karin Wahl-Jørgensen, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2019. 193 pp. £50.00 hbk. £15.99 pbk. £15.99 ebk.

The Snowden revelations of 2013 left the world with a disturbing double-sided knowledge. On the one hand, the widely reported case proved beyond doubt that state actors in tandem with tech companies deploy digital mass surveillance, targeting millions of internet users' everyday activities. On the other hand, citizens became aware that this mode of operation was unlikely to change and that, as individuals, they could do little to prevent it. This new epistemological state of normality provides the backdrop for *Digital Citizenship in a Datafied Society*, which offers one of the most comprehensive critical investigations of surveillance, datafication and digital citizenship to date.

Drawing on extensive empirical data from the UK, including news articles, policy documents, focus groups and more than 40 interviews with media professionals, policy-makers and activists, the book offers a wide-ranging study of journalism, governance, civic engagement and citizen reflections on surveillance and digital citizenship. Situated at the intersection of critical data studies and surveillance studies, the book argues that digital technologies are increasingly reshaping citizenship negatively as "the digital has transformed from something we use to the environment in which we live" enabling "omnipresent data collection and analysis" (Hintz, Dencik, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2019, 21).

Mass data collection and surveillance have worrisome implications for citizenship, as they cause a shift in power away from citizens and towards state agencies and tech corporations. This creates new inequalities between the individual - whose life is increasingly turned into data points, creating what the authors define as personal 'data doubles' - and companies and state actors who own and control this data. These developments are potentially harmful, as they hinder "free expression, dissident communication and organising, and other key elements of digital citizenship," while also enabling "the categorization of citizens according to the data they produce" (Hintz, Dencik, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2019, 81).

After situating the scope of the book and outlining key definitions of digital citizenship and datafication (in Chapters 1 and 2), the empirical part opens with an analysis of digital policy reforms in the UK, particularly the Investigatory Powers Act of 2016. The authors find that - while the Snowden revelations opened up a window for discussing and rethinking regulations - subsequent reforms have tended to emphasise "the state's role in protecting against physical harms, rather than the broader concerns around human security that would include citizens' privacy and civil rights" (Hintz, Dencik, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2019, 80). Instead of seeking to protect citizens' fundamental rights to privacy and free speech, regulations have tended to focus one-sidedly on the need for mass surveillance in order to protect citizens from physical threats, such as terrorism.

Security concerns have also been central in journalistic coverage of the Snowden leaks, as the book shows in Chapter 4. National newspapers in the UK have tended to normalise mass data collection and surveillance by emphasising their role in protecting national security. Additionally, newspapers have predominantly written about political elites as targets of surveillance, instead of focusing on how all citizens are generally targeted and how this has negative implications for (digital) citizenship. In contrast to this, newer 'digital native' media outlets have focused more on the latter, providing a much-needed space of contestation against the encroachment of citizen rights.

After diving into regulations and journalism, the book examines how members of the public in the UK reflect, respond and contest digital mass surveillance. A common finding across interviews with citizens, including political activists, is a tendency to adopt what the authors dub as 'surveillance realism.' This notion encompasses ways in which citizens perceive mass surveillance as an inescapable social order, providing little to no room for individual contestation or escape. While numerous interviewees express deep concern about mass surveillance and encroachment of digital rights, they simultaneously acknowledge that they themselves do little to resist or avoid it, primarily because they do not see any viable options for doing so. Mass surveillance has become an all-encompassing state of normality with little space for alternatives. To the authors, this 'surveillance realism' exemplifies how digital technologies, rather than supporting active citizenship and engagement, is increasingly stifling civic agency, inhibiting citizens from imagining and pursuing viable alternatives to the present surveillance order.

Building on these findings, the authors look towards potential ways forward in Chapter 6, calling for civic action to fight for what they define as 'data justice'. The authors point to existing physical protests, such as the 'Stop Watching Us' movement in the US and 'Freedom Not Fear' protests in Germany, as important manifestations of civic contestation against violations of digital rights. The authors also point to civic resistance online through privacy-enhancing technologies, such as encrypted communication, as a key means of protest. Yet, they underline that the latter cannot stand alone, as tech solutions often tend to individualise problems that need to be addressed collectively. As such, the authors call for broad civic resistance towards mass surveillance that can link questions of privacy, digital rights and datafication directly to issues of social justice (i.e. data justice). Most importantly, the authors contend that there is *still* room for imagining and fighting for alternative futures: "The datafied society is not an inevitable outcome of technological progression but is rather the result of the amalgamation of different actors and social forces, and a particular political economy" (Hintz, Dencik, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2019, 138).

In terms of blind spots, it would perhaps have suited the book to focus more on new forms of exclusion mechanisms embedded in digital citizenship in the age of datafication. As the authors rightly note, scholarship on digital citizenship have in general tended to focus too much on how people (positively) enact citizenship through technology, rather than how technologies exclude or marginalise people from taking part in civic life. As nation states and tech firms increasingly require citizens to be 'digital by default', new and powerful forms of marginalisation and exclusion have emerged, often primarily affecting already disadvantaged groups in society. These groups are also often the main targets of new forms of micro-management through surveillance and algorithmic decision-making. With that in mind, the book provides a vital contribution to the field and will undoubtedly be of interest to students, scholars and citizens alike in Europe and beyond concerned with the state and future of citizenship in datafied societies.

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