

Redefining the Datafication of Selves

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Review of *Data Selves: More-than-Human Perspectives*, by Deborah Lupton. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020 80 pp.

Deborah Lupton’s book *Data Selves: More-than-Human Perspectives* is a brief on personal data and data-mediated livelihood. It brings in scholarly discussions on our daily engagement with the gigantic amount of personal data that modern technologies have been collecting from us since the beginning of the era of mobile phones, apps, wearable devices and surveillance cameras. It also makes timely reflections on recent issues about data security and privacy, as well as popular imaginaries of data that we encounter through various channels and in multiple realms.

In this book, Lupton offers a comprehensive analysis of how personal data are conceptualized, used and interpreted as part of our subjectivity, embodiment, and social relations through which “people make and enact data, and data make and enact people” (6). It is a complementary reading of her earlier book *Quantified Self* (Lupton 2016), in which she investigated self-tracking and the shaping power of tracking data on the making of selfhood. Her study of self-tracking was built on the Foucauldian notion of biopolitics, the idea that tracked data yields the manifestation of vitality which ought to be monitored, governed, and disciplined under neoliberal politics. But at the same time, self-trackers are actively participating in this “reflexive monitoring” process, interpreting and negotiating meanings of self. In *Data Selves*, Lupton expands her investigation into a broader field, applying some of the theoretical ideas she developed previously onto all the personal data that are collected—consciously or unconsciously, actively or passively—and the construction of new personhood in this sensor-saturated world. The account also resonates with recent controversies over data usage and subsequent privacy concerns (such as Cambridge Analytica scandal in 2018), bringing in ethical discussions on the sharing and exploitation of data.

Different from the previous book which highlights the “self,” *Data Selves* underlines the interplay between data and selves. One of the most innovative ways to think about the relationship is the fundamental claim Lupton lays out in the second chapter: a “more-than-human” perspective. It derives from her existing idea of the “data-human assemblage” which addresses the entangled existence of humans and data. She draws on theories from feminist new materialism, that humans and non-humans converge and incorporate into a posthuman being, to articulate the similar connections between humans and data. Our living experiences are “mediated through algorithmic processes and digital modes of storage” (30); our bodily and even mental attributes are rendered visible by data, and are combined with our sensory and affective experiences. This active engagement gives us something Lupton calls an “agential cut,” with which we are constantly making and giving meaning to those personal data, and through which we establish a new sense of self and life.

This approach makes a distinction from the conventional view that data serves as an objective reflection of ourselves; or the notion of “dataveillance” (van Dijck 2014), in which we are understood to be passively exploited by the digital material we generate. Instead, Lupton takes a rather active stance in terms of our “agential capacities.” This opens up sociological investigations of interaction with personal data (or in a “more-than-human” term, “intra-action,” see p. 27-28), which Lupton gives a rather extensive examination in chapter 4 and chapter 5 using ethnographic materials from her research projects about self-tracking (most of which were conducted after the publication of *Quantified Self*). She tackles how people make meanings (the “data sense”) and feelings (the “data affect”), as well as how the data itself is endowed with livelihood (the “data memento”)—enchantment of data with “thing-power” (94-96). She concludes that in this way the assemblage of human-data shapes people’s embodied responses and actions, their sense of selfhood, and their relationships with outside world (99).

Taking the same approach, Lupton continues to investigate the sharing and exploiting of personal data—by themselves and by other agencies. Data is personal, but nowadays it is becoming communal when people post their activities on social media; or becoming public when data are collected for commercial or political purposes. She acknowledges the tension between the private and communal/public realm, but also addresses the importance of perceptual and affective perspective of sharing and using data. For example, posting things on Facebook is more often seen as making meaningful, happy connections rather than dangerously exposing ourselves (although it can be both at the same time). The concern comes from people not being able to discern how data is generated and material-

ized (120). In this sense, Lupton opens up a new way of conceptualizing privacy issues of personal data: is a user fully able to exercise his/her “agential capacities” over personal data (i.e., to understand and control the collection and use of personal data)? Or, who owns the agency over the use of the data (i.e., a user, a trained expert, or a policy maker)?

Building on the idea of “more-than-human,” Lupton engages not only with sociological investigations, but also philosophical and ethical discussions. She proposes a new onto-ethic-epistemological orientation for studying personal data: what *are* the data (human-data assemblage), *how to* study them (examining affordance, mediation and interaction), and how the relationships between us and data *should be* (whether agential capacities are obtained). The human components in the data practice are not to be ignored—data is not about digital information and its technological application, but the embodiment of human living/livelihood in various social contexts. Therefore, the dehumanization of data is to be avoided when dealing with issues of data privacy.

This book engages with a wide range of scholarship not limited to data itself, but including social, cultural, philosophical or even literary studies of technology, and in conversations with current STS (science, technology & society) literature on topics like sociotechnical imaginaries, scientific objectivity, dataveillance and datafication. It signifies the importance of technology studies on micro-aspects such as technological affordances where the embodiment and enactment of data takes place, thus could be useful for design studies as well.

In a less voluminous book like this one, there is little mention of the societal texture behind doing and sharing data. As a sociologist myself, I would see this book as a start-point of more contextual and structural studies of meaning-making process. For other scholars, this book could be a point of reflection as well as an exploration of possible interdisciplinary works, if they wouldn't be too annoyed by the frequent appearances of strange terminologies from other areas of study. Overall, it is a great and inspiring book to read.

References

- Lupton, Deborah. 2016. *The Quantified Self*. Malden: Polity Press.
- Van Dijck, José. 2014. “Datafication, Dataism and Dataveillance: Big Data Between Scientific Paradigm and Ideology.” *Surveillance & Society* 12(2): 197–208. <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v12i2.4776>