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TRANSPARENCY AS RUPTURE: OPEN DATA AND THE DATAFIED SOCIETY OF HONG KONG

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This paper deals with Open Data and the datafication of governance in Hong Kong. It addresses contestations over “transparency” as a techno-political construction that is embodied in, and performed by, the infrastructures and techniques of data-centric governance. Transparency is a site of negotiating distributions of cognition and perception in the context of transformations of citizenship and governance in the datafied society. I specifically inquire into the infrastructures, protocols, techniques, and practices of Open Data, which promises to simultaneously enhance government accountability and stimulate data-driven “smart” governance. Accordingly, I look at techno-political organizations of data and data infrastructures that support particular modes and distributions of cognition and perception (Halpern 2014; Hayles 2014; Kitchin 2014), which I distinguish as two data regimes respectively revolving around “representation” and “prediction.” I furthermore situate these issues in the larger institutional and political context of Hong Kong. The relevance of locating this case study in Hong Kong is that Hong Kong brands itself as an ICT Hub and ranks rather highly on smart city indexes. Yet at the same time the process of adapting Open Data is (structurally) incomplete, disruptive, and disrupted in the encounter with residual rationalities of statecraft. Hong Kong as a Special Administrative Region of China helps us think about datafication and Open Data in relation to the transgressive processes of accommodating neoliberalism through an array of exceptions (Ong 2006). Yet the case of Hong Kong also provides a glimpse of the possibilities for intervention and Open Data activism.

To focus on adaptation means that the datafied society does not present itself as a *fait accompli*, in other words, fully operational and all-encompassing. Rather, adaptation induces instances of (experienced) failure, disruption, and deferment; it generates contradictions, interferences, and articulations between co-existing data regimes and multifarious political rationalities (cf. Chan 2013). On the one hand, such instances are Hoyng, R.. (2017, October 18-21). *Transparency as Rupture: Open Data and the Datafied Society of Hong Kong*. Paper presented at AoIR 2017: The 18th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Tartu, Estonia: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

recuperated and normalized as intrinsic to “disruptive” technological innovation and testbed “smart” urbanism. Yet, on the other hand, these moments might offer possibilities for imagining more radical notions of transparency and secrecy. In this paper, “disruption” functions as a methodological device to explore the politics of datafication and Open Data. Rather than appropriating disruption as a revelatory moment undoing the “black-boxing” of technology per se, my aim is to rethink the politics of transparency and secrecy in more complex terms, oriented onto distributions of particular data regimes and the contradictions and articulations between them (Birchal 2015). I deploy mixed methods including interviews with actors, participatory ethnography, and analysis of policy documents and technical literature. Looking at particular material architectures, formats, protocols, and interfaces as I encounter them in Hong Kong, I try to detect how their operation poses continuities and schisms in comparison to the analysis of design in historical and social studies of technology and medium theory.

To elaborate, the two data regimes of “representation” and “prediction” enactment particular “fields” of visibility: organized articulations of strategies, techniques, and discourses (Halpern 2014). First, the data regime of “representation” provides cognition and perception in terms of oversight and transparency. Ordering data (capturing, aggregating, and organizing) forms part and parcel of ordering society. Data forms evidence for what exists “out there” and affords referential, descriptive capability. Hence, it is supposed to assist in the production of knowledge and truth. This paper explores in what ways Open Data means the distribution of the representative gaze and reflects on assumptions that partaking in this mode of perception constitutes a democratic virtue and moral good.

Second, the data regime of prediction orients perception and cognition onto diagnosis of potential and the prediction of tendencies. Rather than depicting the world, at stake is modeling the world. The technological ability to constant update in response to new data is considered a benefit supporting intervention in shifting patterns and trends (Andrejevic 2013). Distribution of this mode of perception and cognition induces society’s mediation by algorithmic data processing techniques. This paper explores in what ways Open Data advances the predictive gaze and how it positions citizens or users who are on the one hand interpellated into positions of predictive perception and cognition and, on the other hand, subjected to dataveillance and techniques of algorithmic processing.

Rather than recognizing data regimes in an ideal-typical fashion, my main question is about the contradictions, interferences, and articulations that the co-existence of the two regimes of data expediency bring forth in the particular context of Hong Kong. This focus underscores Open Data’s paradox of promising fortified transparency and accountability, while simultaneously advancing covert forms of modulation, control, dataveillance, and concentrations of cognition.

I argue that Open Data involves decisions over the boundaries of the datafiable. Open Data is in fact “bordered data,” whereby the limited coverage of data correspond to state territoriality (or the terrain of statecraft), but the real question is often what lies beyond. If transparency and secrecy co-constituted, something escapes the particular constructions of transparency in Open Data (Birchall 2015). For instance, if the government opens up certain datasets, does this enable the public scrutiny of statecraft or does it merely benefit the expansion of what Easterling (2015) has called extrastatecraft by non-governmental institutions that do not open their own “proprietary” datasets? How do data and data infrastructures mediate citizens’ relation to private-public governance? In what ways do datasets and digital infrastructures become the sites of neoliberal exceptions to the law, for instance through “regulatory sandboxes” for innovators? And, to what extent are Open Data activists able to not just reclaim public scrutiny over statecraft and governance by the state, but in fact contest the “bordering” of data—the decision over the borders of Open Data--itself? And, following a more speculative turn, what would it take to intervene into the effects of predictive perception and cognition on society? Should transparency always be the goal, or does secrecy have its merits too?

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