DATA POLITICS AT THE GRASSROOTS

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In the age of datafication we increasingly witness the emergence of transformative experiments of engagement with data that see citizens to put data to new uses. These "moments where meaningful change can occur, even if those changes are (…) tinged with technocracy" (Schrock, 2016, p. 583), speak to the unprecedented possibility for ordinary people to foster social change by engaging in data politics. Civic hackers seek to improve institutional output and democratic governance (Townsend, 2013); data visualization has become part of the activists' skillset (Tactical Tech Collective, 2013); capacity building manuals target low-skill users. Meanwhile, activists counter massive data collection by means of resistance and obfuscation, offering trainings and off-the-shelves tools to secure digital communications (Kazansky, 2016). We subsume these diverse manifestations of an emerging bottom-up critical attitude towards massive data collection under the rubric of "data activism". Data activism embraces the composite series of practices that, emerging at the fringes of contemporary activism ecosystem, critically interrogate datafication and its socio-political consequences. Data activism identifies as well as intercepts emergent "networked publics", as they are structured by data and software and the related imaginaries (see boyd, 2010).

Two elements characterize data activism: its sociotechnical nature and the mobilization factor. First, data activism is enabled and constrained by data and software, both its availability and its pursuit—and this special relation shapes tactics, identities, and modes of organizing. Second, data activism represents an instance of political mobilization explicitly confronting or engaging with datafication. This definition foregrounds democratic agency, while taking a holistic perspective that unites under the same label instances of affirmative engagement with data and tactics of resistance to surveillance.

Groups active in this domain range from tech- and digital rights-oriented nongovernmental organizations to informal communities of hackers and developers

involved in designing encryption tools. Innovative alliances emerge when, for example, journalists collaborate with advocates and progressive data analysts, or environmental activists look for data experts in order to support their campaigns. Data is increasingly perceived as a crosscutting, sine-qua-non tool for participation in today's democratic life. The social forces supporting these incipient activism practices are not new. For one, current data activism is modeled after hacker cultures and rituals: similarly, data activists preach technical engagement as a way of confronting elite expertise and taking control over technology. There is, however, a novel attempt to move beyond the expert niche to involve and empower lay users (Milan, 2017). Nonetheless, and despite data activism is imbued with an ethos of inclusion and empowerment, it still presents evident limitations insofar as expertise remains a key determinant for engagement.

We argue that data activism is a tool to think politically about big data *from the perspective of users.* This theoretical article explores the notion of data activism as a new entry in the conceptual toolbox of contemporary digital activism research. It offers a conceptual map to approach grassroots engagement with data from an interdisciplinary perspective, combining Science and Technology Studies with political sociology/theory. It zooms in three ways of mobilizing the notion of data activism for research purposes, as derived from our empirical work within the DATACTIVE project[1]: #1 as a heuristic tool for empirical analysis and theoretical development; #2 as (a) novel epistemic culture(s) emerging within civil society; #3 as a speculative device to rethink the definition of citizenship and the state/citizen relation with respect to digitalization and datafication. In what follows we briefly outline these three possibilities.

#1 Data activism as a heuristic tool
Data activism constitutes a valuable heuristic tool for the study of political participation and civil engagement in the age of datafication. As such, it presents four features. It is a composite concept because, as its interdisciplinary origin suggests, it is made of parts: at the minimum people, contention, information, and technology. It is polyfunctional as it can be read through diverse disciplinary lenses, and can be domesticated to investigate different dynamics and relations. Third, it encourages us to adopt a holistic perspective, as it brings together the opportunities and the threats brought forward by datafication and the varied response of the grassroots (engagement/resistance). By taking data activism as a whole, we acknowledge engagement and resistance adhere to the same phenomenon, whose components cannot be fully understood if taken in isolation. Finally, the notion of data activism is polysemic: "activism" embraces distinct practices as discrete but complementary means to achieving political goals, allowing different attitudes towards institutions and social norms to coexist (Milan & van der Velden, 2016).

We distinguish two forms of data activism: i) proactive data activism, which identifies affirmative uses of data for advocacy and social change, and ii) reactive data activism, which on the contrary embraces instances of resistance to massive data collection.

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[1] See https://data-activism.net. The DATACTIVE project explores the evolution of activism and democratic participation vis-à-vis datafication. It is supported by a Starting Grant of the European Research Council awarded to Stefania Milan as Principal Investigator (StG-2014_639379).

While these represent merely ideal-type, fluid categories, they provide a useful map to make sense of forms of activism that are usually considered in isolation from each other, but that, we argue, can only be properly understood in their relation to datafication as the fundamental paradigm change of our age.

#2 Data activism as novel epistemic cultures
Big data constitutes a novel, powerful system of knowledge with its own epistemology and (seductive, simplified) representations. They have the potential to alter our vision of the world and our "theory of knowledge". As a response to the big data phenomenon, data activism can be seen as an exercise in creating alternative ways of seeing the world, while questioning the positivism ethos of the "data revolution" and criticizing the control by the elites over the "politics of representation" (Fraser, 2005). Data activism represents a set of novel epistemic cultures emerging within civil society: a way of making counter-discourses challenging the mainstream readings of reality or "producing new languages or modifying old ones so as to find words for novel phenomena" (Jasanoff, 2004, p. 41). Epistemic cultures shape the way we relate to knowledge and its validation, how we understand and filter the world around us as well as our experiences. Data activism, postulating a critical/active engagement with data, its forms, and its infrastructure, functions as a producer of counter-expertise and alternative epistemologies, making sense of data as a way of knowing the world and turning it into a point of intervention (Milan & van der Velden, 2016). In so doing, data activists challenge and change the mainstream politics of knowledge, and operate as mediators between the dominant algorithmic culture and the citizenry.

#3 Data activism as redefinition of citizenship
A third way of reading data activism is through the lenses of political theory. Data activism encourages us to rethink the relationship between the state and its citizens. These practices can be seen as an instance of revitalization of the citizens' democratic agency. They build upon the ongoing crisis of the liberal democracy as it is being accelerated by "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff, 2015), and carve out spaces that intercept the growing demand for participation and direct engagement with public matters. They create bridges between different organizational cultures, including the corporate one, and seek to construct public space that subvert the "algorithmic citizenship" (Cheney-Lippold, 2011) as defined by the state apparatus. In the same way in which the rise of the network society observed by Castells (2009) has altered the relation between the state and civil society, data activism has the potential to change the way people enact their democratic agency. Positing data as an object of contention and intervention and fostering citizen empowerment thanks to the direct engagement with data and data infrastructure, data activism comes to constitute a novel "politics of the quotidian" (Rodriguez, 2001) that expands and multiplies spaces and opportunities for political action. Moving towards a technical notion of citizenship (Feenberg, 2011), data activism encourage us to take democratic innovations seriously, and to see resilience and mobilization as democratic processes of the everyday—and by extension to reconsider the definition and evolution of citizenship with respect to digitalization and datafication.

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