



Selected Papers of #AoIR2022:
The 23rd Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Dublin, Ireland / 2-5 Nov 2022

TOWARD INTIMATE DATA: RE-THINKING DIGITAL, SOCIAL, POLITICAL RELATIONS

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Datafication of Self and Others

Increasingly pervasive and invasive forms of data collection and extraction characterize contemporary life across the globe. Much research has clarified how such datafication shifts relations between technology and society (Van Dijck 2014), but there are persistent unresolved questions related to the tensions between datafication of social groups and datafication of individuals. While datafication technologies help produce and monitor meaningful or manageable populations, they also operate and have effects at the level of the individual, and such practices have frequently been engaged through the idea of *intimacy*. Personal habits and browsing histories now produce tremendous value for private companies (Cheney-Lippold 2018), while in the United States physical and other movements are subject to geospatial surveillance through smart phones (Valentino-DeVries 2020). Additionally, sensors directly applied to individual bodies have become more widespread, with high-profile examples like Fitbit, Apple watches, and fitness tracking apps eclipsing more insidious cases like Amazon's Halo watch that always listens to your voice and asks you to take undressed selfies to measure BMI (Hern 2020). These transformations are happening on a global scale, but look different in particular socio-political and legal geographies.

Some have leveraged the idea of *intimacy* to problematize the individual's position and role at one end of these poles. In this paper, we ask how intimacy is conceived and mobilized as a category of datafication and its products. We take it up as less a demarcation of particular *types* of data, and more as a socially *productive* framing: it does work that goes far beyond mere description. We recast intimacy as marshaling the

Suggested Citation (APA): Burns, R., Hoffmann, A.L., & Welker, P. (2022, November). *Toward intimate data: Re-thinking digital, social, political relations*. Paper presented at AoIR 2022: The 23rd Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Dublin, Ireland: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

production of individual bodies and their relations to broader structures of power and epistemologies.

Intimate Data So Far

In literature to date, intimacy marks an effort to describe data's objective and affective effects on people. "Intimate data" is hardly a consistent or unified category, but some salient themes do emerge. Often, intimate data is used to mark a particular category of tracked behaviors or activities that are deemed—as a matter of legal or social convention—private or sensitive (Weltevrede and Jansen 2019). Here, the "intimate" in intimate data is cast as a metric: the closer the datafied phenomena is to that individual's fleshy body, the higher its degree of purported intimacy. For example, intimate data are often envisioned to encompass sexual encounters, movement through a city, fertility apps, or fitness activities. These critiques are usually situated within broader consideration for enrollment in economic production, especially circuits of capitalist production (Gidaris 2019; Sadowski 2019).

Some key assumptions prop up this approach to the "intimate" in intimate data: it assumes a public/private dichotomy (even when the argument complicates it), it reifies existing categories or kinds of relationships already deemed "intimate" (by the law, by medicine, and so on), and it assumes a legible and identifiable "body" outside of the contingent and ontogenetic forces that bring them into being. Consequently, this approach sometimes evokes the language of individual or group "privacy" a way to mark and resist such data extraction processes.

Recasting Intimate Data

Without denying that these assumptions can be—at times, in some contexts—politically expedient, we want to surface them and inquire into their limits, especially for making sense of data's social-reproductive effects. First, taking the idea of a "body" for granted sidesteps the way bodies themselves become legible through unequal socio-political relationships. Intimate data do not merely index data about or "close to" an individual body, but also reflect and extend orders that unevenly distribute the benefits and burdens of visibility and social participation: orders that are often enabled by the assumed dichotomy between public and private life.

Here, we recall Nash's (2019) critique of the (white) feminist anti-violence advocacy that sought to make more permeable the boundary between the private, domestic space of the home and the public, disciplinary forces of the state. Nash reminds us that what counts as a private or intimate space worthy of special consideration is not only gendered, but racialized, and that impacts of intimate violence will always be different for Black women than for white women. Heeding Nash's reminder, we want to emphasize that the act of labeling this or that data "intimate" is never just about marking data as sensitive or close to a body, but instead marshals broader relations of gendered and racialized power. In this way, "intimate data" are always bound up with the production and regulation of gender, race, sexuality, class, citizenship status, and beyond.

Second, we submit that the terrain of "intimate data" can serve as less of uncritical recitation of categories and experiences *already assumed* intimate and more as an

analytic for studying the cultural production of intimacy and, perhaps, unmaking intimacy's hegemonic associations. A small but growing number of scholars gesture at this conceptual possibility (e.g., Pienaar *et al* 2021). For one, Kwon *et al* (2018, 19) remind us that "intimate data is not intimate per se, nor is intimacy a property of the data, but is an interactional outcome".

Aligned with these works, we gesture toward an idea of "intimate data" that is less descriptive and more analytic. As Grayson (1998, 544) argued, new technologies make the once settled and protected rules of intimacy suddenly "visible and available for (re)interpretation and (re)inscription." Following this, we note that popular discussions of data ethics or data justice visibilize the hermetic liberalism of idealized autonomous subjects through their debates over consent and exchange. Instead of reinscribing these ethical relations, we offer a politics of data as eliciting confessions, creating vulnerabilities, and developing new possibilities for governing (inter)personal and other relations. To quote the late Berlant (1998, 286), "rethinking intimacy calls out not only for redescription but for transformative analyses of the...conditions that enable hegemonic fantasies to thrive in the minds and on the bodies of subjects...".

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