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Trusting data: the everyday geographies of gay men and digital data

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Introduction

Public trust in digital data, algorithms and devices is under scrutiny, and academics are arguing that digital data are transforming social, cultural, economic and political life (Amoore, 2014; Barns, 2018; Leszczynski, 2016; Lyon, 2014; van Dijck, 2014). It is apparent that companies and corporations that collect and use the data that people generate on their digital technologies – for example, smart phones, smart watches or laptops – should not necessarily be trusted, as they do not operate in a ways that benefit societies (van Dijck, 2014; Zuboff, 2019). We are constantly being alerted to the mishandling of data or the creation of algorithms that are embedded in, and reproduce, racists, misogynist, transphobic, homophobic and ableist conditions (Amoore, 2020; Cockayne & Richardson, 2017). For example, in 2018 and again in 2021, Grindr was revealed to be illegally selling user data to advertising firms and failing to keep sensitive details (like HIV status and location) secure and private. Despite the continued awareness of these uncertain conditions, there is much still

to learn about the ways digital data are remaking spatial and social processes, patterns and power relations, especially at the everyday scale.

It is here that I situate my call – for digital geographers to more closely examine how digital data are remaking everyday social and spatial processes by exploring how people are ‘living with’ digital data. Work in critical data studies is beginning to show the merits of situating data in the everyday (Lupton, 2017; Pink et al., 2017), yet geographers can still make contributions here. Feminist digital geographies have alerted us to the ways different people use and are impacted by digital technologies in different ways (Bonner-Thompson & McDowell, 2021; Elwood, 2020; Elwood & Leszczynski, 2018; Longhurst, 2017), and these ideas must now be used to explore digital data and algorithms. I would argue that this should also be done by working with people to expose the ways that data impacts their lives in multiple ways. I advocate for this to be done by engaging with feminist, queer and postcolonial approaches that enable an understanding of the ways that data impact people in different ways based on their different identity arrangements, therefore being attentive to the ways power relations emerge and are negotiated and contested.

As part of this agenda, I have started a research project that explore the ways LGBTQ+ people, living in Brighton and Hove, UK, are negotiating ‘trust’ in relation to digital data in their everyday lives. In the project, I think about trust as an emergent process (Withers, 2018), where relationships with data emerge in different ways across time and space. I also understand digital data as partial and incomplete ‘things’ that can never fully know or represent the complexity of embodied lives (Lupton, 2017; Pink et al., 2017). This chapter focuses on initial analysis from this research, exploring how a group of 5 white gay middle-class men living in Brighton and Hove, UK, negotiate the uncertainties of living with digital data that is collected on their smart devices, in particular the complicated ways that they ‘trust’ what happens with this data. These 5 men participated in interviews with creative

mapping and recorded a 'data diary' via signal – an encrypted instant messaging service. I focus on these 5 gay men as initial analyses revealed an interesting relationship with digital data - that these men felt protected by their identities along the axis of gender, race and class, yet it was their sexual identities that called into question their ability to trust how the collection of digital data might impact their lives.

The aims of this chapter are twofold; to explore the contradictory and ambivalent relationships gay men, living in Brighton and Hove, have with digital data; and to urge geographers to further explore the relationships between intersectional identities and data in everyday spaces and places to expose the power relations that are folded into, and out of, the ways people live with digital data. I argue that relationships with data emerge in relation to embodied identities and everyday places that then shape how spaces are experienced. To do so, I first provide a brief overview of feminist and queer digital geographies and a review of work that situates data in everyday contexts. Second, I provide more details on the research project that this chapter is based on. Third, I explore the ambivalent, contradictory and uncertain relationships my participants had with digital data and the ways these relationships are contingent on their identities. Finally, I provide a summary and urge geographers to continue situating digital data in the everyday.

Situating data in the everyday

To think about the relationship between power, identity and data, I engage with feminist and queer geographic understandings of the digital (Bonner-Thompson, 2017; Cockayne & Richardson, 2017; Elwood, 2020; Elwood & Leszczynski, 2018). In such approaches, there is a desire to understand how power relations are folded into digital technologies. For example, the ways digital infrastructures and code are built on normative understandings of bodies and identities, embedding inequalities into digital devices. Not only, feminist and queer geographers use theoretical understandings of bodies and embodiment to explore how people

relate with the digital (Bonner-Thompson, 2020; Longhurst, 2016; Miles, 2017) and engage in emotional and affective politics to understand how relationships with the digital create ways of being (McLean et al., 2019). In most of this research, issues of power, inequality and oppression are foregrounded to challenge normative systems that seek to disempower particular groups of people of political movements.

This chapter – and the research project more broadly – engages with feminist and queer understandings of bodies, emotions and affects (Bondi & Davidson, 2005; Brown, 2008; Longhurst, 2004), to explore the complicated and messy relationships with data. The chapter focuses on trust as an affective and emotional intensity that is felt in and through the body, but is also emergent, relational and unpredictable. Trust is a relatively unexplored idea and concept in human geography – and in-depth discussions are beyond this chapter – but that does not mean trust is not worthy of geographic understanding. Trust is socially and culturally formed over space and time, is dependent on identity formations and can sustain our engagement with objects, institutions, people and places (Withers, 2018). Examining trust – and what/who we do/do not trust can reveal how people make sense of themselves and the world around them. The ways data is/is not trusted is always evolving (van Dijck, 2014), emerging in relation to social and cultural norms, political contexts and identities, being shaped by the spaces and places that data is made or situated.

The media, tech companies and political figures often present digital data as a way to enhance our lives (for example, increased surveillance creating safe nations or cities or the convenience of personal assistants) (Smith, 2018; van Dijck, 2014). These discourses are prevalent in western societies, aiming to intensify and sustain our use of the digital. Of course, we also understand data and algorithms to pose threats to our privacy as they can intensify surveillance (Lyon, 2014; Zuboff, 2019), yet these threats may be somewhat unknown and unclear. Such conflicting discourses mean data occupies uncertain positions in

our everyday lives. Situating data in the everyday can therefore reveal how this uncertainty manifests and shapes everyday lives. At the same time, exploring data in the everyday can disrupt understandings that data can be all knowing and all encompassing, – that data can somehow fully represent, control and survey our lives (Lupton, 2016; Pink, Ruckenstein, et al., 2018; Sumartojo et al., 2016) - instead data is always incomplete as, for example, it may fail to capture certain moments, practices, bodily processes and places (Esmonde, 2019).

There remains a lack of work in geography that situates data in the everyday, therefore I am engaging with critical data studies. Pink et al (2017, p. 10) use the concept of ‘mundane data’ to...

...centre the analysis on the ordinary sites of everyday life where digital data is lively and leaky – that is where data becomes part of and open to those constantly changing configurations of things and processes through which life continues, and through which affective meanings are emergent.

Exploring data in the everyday then enables an understanding of how discourses, ideas and meanings are negotiated and contested as people live with data.

Emerging research is exploring the ways personal relationships with the datafiction of everyday life are complicated, highlighting the contradictions, the trade-offs and the ways that people try to make living with data feel ‘alright’ (Mathieu & Hartley-Møller, 2021; Pink, Lanzeni, et al., 2018). For example, Pridmore and Mols (2020) highlight that people living with Integrated Personal Assistants (e.g. Amazon Alexa or Google Home) in European homes experience concerns over the collection of their data alongside a desire for the development of further technologies that would enhance domestic spaces. Mathieu and Hartley-Møller (2021) highlight how their participants in Roskilde, Denmark, did not trust the companies that owned the digital media they used, simultaneously not wanting to be confronted with the reality of corporate data practices as it may lead to greater questioning

and rethinking of their own use of digital media and devices, disrupting their everyday lives and routines.

In the context of runners who use self-tracking apps in an East Coast city in the United States, Esmonde (2019) highlights some ways that running data is incomplete, for example when data might be missed or not collected if a runner forgets to restart the app if it has been paused due to an obstacle that is encountered in urban spaces. Esmonde explains how this can create anxieties amongst runners as it may not ‘fully’ reflect the run and any progress. Here, there is a demonstration that whilst data may sometimes be understood as ‘objective’, it is still always being produced by corporeal bodies and the spaces they move through, as data does not evade the everydayness of spaces, objects and bodies. Therefore everyday perspectives on data highlight how data can be ‘broken’ (Pink, Ruckenstein, et al., 2018). Whilst these studies provide important insights into the ways people come to live with data, there is little exploration of the ways embodied identities are also folded into these processes. In some of my own research, I highlight how young white working class men, living in the margins of society in the UK, have become sceptical of digital data and smart technologies as they feel it leads to intensified tracking (Bonner-Thompson & McDowell, 2021). For these men, their working-class masculine reputations (as criminals and troublesome), their reliance on state welfare and the practices they must engage in to survive all become folded into their relationships with digital data and technology. It is such approaches I develop in this chapter, to examine how digital data emerges in relation to intersectional identities. Before doing so, I provide an overview of the broader project, and the methodological approach I have taken.

Exploring data in the everyday: the project

‘Living Queer with Data’ is a research project that is currently funded by a University of

Brighton seed funding scheme, having also been approved by the ethics committee. The project aims to explore how LGBTQ+ people living in Brighton and Hove negotiate 'trust' in the context of digital data. It will not only explore relationships with the data they produce, but also the data that they are presented with on their personal devices. This chapter particularly focuses on whether gay men trust what happens to the data they produce and what it might be used for. The project used creative mapping interviews and 'data diaries' as the methods. These five participants were recruited through social media platforms – Facebook and Instagram – in May and June 2021. Social media platforms seemed most appropriate as I was targeting people using digital devices and platforms, and I also started recruiting during the Covid19 Lockdown in the UK. Once participants responded, we communicated through my university email address to share Information Sheets and Consent Forms. I then shared a Microsoft Teams link, which was used to conduct the interviews. To start the interviews, participants drew a map of the data they think they produce and where they think it goes. These were used to begin the conversation. Afterwards, participants had the option to record a 'data diary' via the encrypted instant messaging service, Signal. Three of the five participants chose to record a diary. Participants were asked to record times and moments they 'thought' about data and their reflections on it. The diaries provided some contextually specific data from everyday places and situations. All data was transcribed and analysed using NVivo. The analysis revealed how white gay middle-class men have ambivalent and contradictory relationships with trust, anxieties and digital data, that emerged differently dependent on their identities and the places that data was located in, which I explore in the next part of this chapter.

Trust, anxieties and places

To explore the complicated, ambivalent and contradictory relationships that the five gay men

have with data with data, I first highlight the general distrust of the companies that collect digital data, which I follow with the ways these men feel at ease with the uncertainty surrounding data and finally the moments that cause the most anxieties.

First, all of the participants stated that they did not necessarily trust what corporations, companies and governments ‘do’ with the data that is generated and collected across their devices, as Charlie says:

I mean, I don’t trust them at all, but like apple, and google, still probably know everything about me... where I live, where I work, what I eat... My phone even brings up my Waitrose card when I’m near the store... it is a bit mad

Charlie, 30

Charlie exemplifies a conflict, contradiction and ambivalence that all of the participants expressed – that they generally did not trust what happens to their data, but continued to use digital devices, that generate and collect data, to manage their everyday lives (Mathieu & Hartley-Møller, 2021). There is a general sense that companies that collect data have ‘everything’ there is to know. Jake and I were talking about his use of Instagram, fitness trackers and the app used by his local gym, when he says:

oh, cookies and it’s like, oh, I’m consenting to something, I’m giving away some of my rights basically ... No, I gave away everything. And I think that every part of my body belongs to someone else at the moment... So, every time that it [notifications asking for consent] pops up I’m like ... disappear, you’re annoying I’m like here we go again. Just take my limb again.

Jake, 29

Jake interestingly discusses how he feels his corporeal body has been disassembled, where different body ‘parts’ are transformed into data and then become owned by different companies.

It is not only bodies that feel like they are being remade by data, but spaces too:

Your home is where you have to feel safe and you only let people in that you trust or that you feel familiar with... right now we bring in these corporates and all these people that we have no idea who they are. And I think that's something that goes really slowly so we don't really know, well it doesn't go really slowly, but for us as a feeling and it happens gradually. So, you don't really notice that it's happening. But, when I just told you that I have like two laptops, a Sonos, Google Home, you're like okay [laughing]. You know, that's the thing. You should feel as if it's your little bubble where no one could get in. And with the developments that are going on, it doesn't really feel like that anymore. There is constantly something in the room and even if you're alone on the couch and the Sonos starts talking it's like 'really bitch, really?'

Jake, 29

In these examples, there is a general sense that rights and ownership of the data on bodies, locations and practices has been relinquished, and that the world of digital data feels beyond the control of individuals, however not all relationships are the same. Charlie highlighted his phone's awareness of his movements through Brighton and Hove, and Jake speaks specifically about the 'loss' of 'ownership' of his body and the remaking of privacy in his domestic space. These examples show how relationships with data are dependent on places, spaces and bodies, with specific types of data and devices creating certain emotional or affective relationships – whether that be around a loss of privacy and/or autonomy or an ambivalence when at home, in the street or at the gym.

Whilst this was a general concern, there was little evidence of attempts to prevent this.

Jake tells me more about why he feels this way:

The thing is I'm going to die in 50 years and they have all my data and they can do with it whatever they want. And there is good and there is bad in everything. People make money out of my data, but people also make the healthcare system a better system with my data. So as long as it's, yeah there is this line where you're like as long as they are not going to spread it around and put it on billboards and things like that, I'm like you can use whatever you want. I'm not really scared about it

Jake has come to accept that some people will be profiting from his data, in hopes that it

might be used for 'good'. In doing so, he articulates how data can be both 'bad' or 'good', and that data itself is always emerging in the ways it might be used. For Jake, understanding that data becomes different things in different assemblages, enables him to find some form of 'peace' or acceptance with the complicated unknowns around data.

At the same time, participants also discussed that they felt protected from the issues that might arise from datafication (e.g. surveillance or leakage) through their identities as white, middle class cisgender men. Andrew discusses how he does not feel 'too worried' about the data that is collected on his multiple devices:

If you're not doing anything wrong, you've got nothing to worry about, and I think I'm a fairly upstanding member of the community, so in terms of myself I'm not doing illicit activities that are going to get picked up in some form of data and then shared to the local police man, so I guess that's probably where I come from the most, you know, a clean life I suppose...

Andrew, 37

Andrew's comments reflect those of other men in the project, who believe that the way they live their lives, and the data that might be collected, doesn't pose much threat. This doesn't mean that they necessarily trust what happens to their data as it is collected, transferred and stored, but that they feel some form of structural or systematic protections from authorities/governments/legal processes because of their identities and practices. Many of the men did not consider themselves as disrupting the status quo of social and cultural life. Jake explicitly mentions his whiteness when he provides demographic data with websites/app:

So, I think that's very, that made me more aware about the data that I was giving them. I was like 'I'm still very much European, white'... And thinking about them more, it hit me that for people that have it harder or are just transgender, which is not accepted by the larger population

Jake, 29

It is here that we see how identities are being folded into relationships with data. The

structural protections that might be offered through their positions as white middle class cis men therefore shape their digital practices. In particular, Andrew highlights the he lives a ‘clean’ life as he doesn’t upset social and cultural orders – for example, engaging in the formal economy by working full time in a health care profession, abiding by the law and being a ‘good’ citizen. In my other work, working class white men living in seaside towns, had very different relationships with digital data and tracking, as they had to engage in informal work and sometimes illegal activities to survive (Bonner-Thompson & McDowell, 2021). Pink et al (2018) argue that to make living with the uncertainty of data ‘alright’, people often engage in strategies or tactics to make their data secure. However, in my research with gay men, making the unknowable and uncontrollable world of data liveable, people may come to rely on the structural and systematic protections that may be afforded by gender, race and class.

In spite of this, when the participants discussed issues relating to sexuality, there was a greater sense of anxiety or worry.

I will only send naked pictures from the neck down, you know... it’s like I wouldn’t want my face to be, like I don’t want them circulating around on the internet ... and I do have to be careful with work [as a healthcare professional]

Jason, 34

For Jason, the threat of the leaking of images shapes his use of digital technologies. Not only, he mentions that his employment is one of the reasons that he feels he must protect his identity, meaning that types of employment might, on the one hand, be a protection from data surveillance, but it also may co-create the conditions (along with sexual identities and practices) that heighten the felt risk from data surveillance.

Another participant felt surveyed during the COVID19 pandemic when he was using the NHS (National Health Service) Contact Tracing App:

Over the lockdown, I had some moments with geolocation ...that was about the NHS track and Trace thing. With the heightened sense of awareness about where you were, I was aware, if I had my phone with me or not, that it was seeing where I was or wasn't, or if I went to the bushes [a local cruising spot in Brighton and Hove] and was cruising - which felt like was one of the sexual options that felt available and safe at particular moments of stark need during the pandemic – then I'd be like, there's only one reason that someone would be in this location...

... There was ambivalence about doing it [cruising] in the first place, and then it's easier to brush aside ambivalence if like, if there's no possibility that anybody knows or sees, you won't have to talk about it and you can pretend it's not happening... it's almost like a little fake conscience operating in some way...

Stan, 36

Hakim et al (2021) have highlighted how queer men in the UK engaged in self reflexive practices to negotiate the restrictions on intimate contact with people outside of their households in order to consider the health of themselves, their partners and the people they lived with. For Stan, part of his self-reflection included how digital data might document the places he visited outside of his home and whether they may expose him as breaking lockdown rules – especially as our movements and mobilities were heavily regulated and became part of moral and ethical responsibilities to public health. He makes it clear that this particular spot in Brighton and Hove – ‘the bushes’ – is known for cruising and therefore his anxieties are rooted in the uses of material places and his location in them. Of course, the data cannot fully know what Stan was doing, or whether he was breaking rules, as it only has a partial understanding of location. However, as he points out, his awareness that these records might be kept and stored creates some form of documentation of his practices. In this context, digital data is remaking how people experience places and the embodied practices that occur in them. At the same time, Stan is sceptical that NHS data is secure (despite claims) and what that data might be used for, not fully trusting that this data would always be kept secure or hidden. It is in these moments – about unknown and uncertain futures around data – that co-

creates anxieties and suspicion shaping how certain people are living with data.

Conclusion

Trusting in institutions, governments and people is filled with messiness, ambivalence and contradiction, and digital data is no different. The ways people are negotiating what it means to trust the data they create – and the data we might get in return – is not a linear or straight forward process, but is always being actively produced in relation to embodied identities as people engage in different practices and places. Through the stories that these 5 white gay middle-class men in Brighton and Hove shared with me, I have highlighted the contradictory and ambivalent relationships these men have with data, that are shaped by their identities and embodied and spatial practices. In doing so, I have situated digital data at the everyday scale to explore how data is not a uniform and fully representing ‘thing’, but emerges differently in different arrangements (Pink et al., 2017; Sumartojo et al., 2016). Data surveillance might feel like it is always present in our lives, but it emerges differently across different places and different configurations of identities.

I would like to urge digital geographers to further explore how digital data emerges in everyday places and spaces, in relation to intersectional identities, to unsettle ideas of data-as-complete. Feminist digital geographic scholarship reminds us that not all users of technologies are the same (Bonner-Thompson & McDowell, 2021; Longhurst, 2017), a sentiment we should take forward when examining data. Data is not transforming our lives in equal and even ways, but is embedded existing power relations and creating new ones that are negotiated and contested. As I have shown in this chapter, queer sexual practices are a source of anxiety, where whiteness is a source of security, which shapes the extent that queer men place trust in data sharing. There are many more ways that geographers might continue to interrogate these issues – trust, privacy and surveillance may all ‘feel’ different for different people depending on the ways their identities emerge in socio-spatial contexts. At the same

time, these issues might create new inequalities, intensify existing inequalities, whilst leaving space for resistances. Therefore, to fully understand how spaces, places and lives are being remade by data, and the ways data might be remade by spaces, places and bodies, geographers should take these everyday and intersectional perspectives forward.

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