

Big Data increasingly pervade all spheres of the contemporary society. Social media have turned into the biggest ever machine to gather data about social behavior and preferences, where users voluntarily disclose post-demographic data. Law enforcement and government agencies collect large amounts of data concerning nearly every movement of their citizens. Digital artifacts and devices increasingly have social consequences. How do massive data collection by state actors and the private sector alike shape our understanding of the political?

The Snowden revelations have prompted citizens to become increasingly aware of the critical role of information as the new fabric of social life. This awareness has triggered new forms of civic engagement and political action, which alter and augment citizens' democratic agency. A variety of socio-technical practices, which I have termed 'data activism', emerge in the fringes of the modern society to impact the way massive data collection is perceived, opposed or leveraged. Data activism has a critical approach to big data at its core, whereby massive data collection is seen as both a challenge to individual rights, and a novel set of opportunities for social change. It appropriates and subverts technological innovation and software, as well as their language and epistemological approach, for political or social change purposes. It concerns both individuals and groups, and operates at different territorial levels, from local to transnational.

My presentation will explore how the emerging data epistemology alters our understanding of the political, and of democratic agency in particular. It will offer the notion of data activism as a heuristic tool to think politically about big data and massive data collection. It will provide a conceptual map to approach citizen engagement with big data from an interdisciplinary perspective, combining political sociology, media studies, and science and technology studies.

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