

Book Review

Hintz, Arne, Lina Dencik and Karin Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) *Digital Citizenship in Datafied society* (Cambridge: Polity Press)

The co-authored volume *Digital Citizenship in a Datafied Society* by Hintz, Dencik and Wahl-Jorgensen asks a timely question: ‘How can we understand citizenship in an age defined by data collection and processing?’ (p. 2). The book’s premise is that we live in an era where decision-making is increasingly becoming the result of computer algorithms fed by ‘Big Data’-analytics. This digital development does not only enable the collection and analysis of unprecedented amounts of personal data, governments also increasingly deploy the new digital tools to make and support decisions that have a crucial impact on citizen’s every-day life. According to the authors, this represents a power shift in favor of the governments vis-à-vis the citizens, and offers a ground for reflections on the social, economic and political forces that shape digital citizenship. It is hard to disagree with this.

In their first theoretical chapter Hintz, Dencik and Wahl-Jorgensen set the scene. They identify core themes and trends in citizenship studies, and considers developments in citizenship through the internet and digital tools. In particular, the chapter describes the development from the techno-optimism in the 1990s and early 2000s, characterized by hopes for stronger democracy, and a more active and engaged citizenship, until the present situation where technology seems to be just as much a threat to, as a facilitator of, democracy and citizenship. First, active citizenship has been limited by state restrictions on the free flow of information (e.g. by filtering, blocking and legal rules for online speech). Second, citizens are increasingly monitored through the traces they leave during their online activities. According to the authors, this last aspect particularly ‘complicates contemporary notions of digital citizenship’ (p. 37). The reason being that agency shifts from the individual citizen to those who process his or her data. Digital citizenship of today is thus constituted both by the acts of digital subjects as well as through the collection and analyses of these subjects’ data. Against this backdrop, the authors offer ‘a new understanding of digital citizenship that incorporates the practices, infrastructures and consequences of datafication’ (p. 145).

In the second chapter, Hintz, Dencik and Wahl-Jorgensen commence to summarize their theoretical underpinnings for investigating the collection and analysis of data. While many voices today communicate how data can inform decision-making, problem-solving and enable positive changes to practice, this book takes a firm critical stance in the tradition of surveillance studies and critical data studies. Accordingly, their presentation of the field emphasizes potential risks (rather than opportunities).

The chapter starts by outlining the role and meaning of data in contemporary economies and the logic that underpins datafication. It then moves on to scrutinize the various ways in which citizens are being governed through data analytics, and highlights the key areas of concern for notions of digital citizenship in a datafied society. This presentation includes key features of big data, logics of prediction and pre-emption, and the ‘participatory nature’ of contemporary surveillance. Last, but not least, a number of critical issues are raised, related to privacy, social justice and procedural fairness.

Following this theoretical foundation, the book traces the forces that shape digital citizenship by investigating the regulatory frameworks (Chapter 3), the mediated public debate (Chapter 4), the citizens’ knowledge and understanding of data analytics (Chapter 5), and the possibilities for dissent and resistance (Chapter 6). The data in the empirical chapters originates from the research project ‘Digital

Citizenship and Surveillance Society’ meaning that there is a specific interest in understanding how the Snowden revelations have shaped debates about surveillance and digital citizenship in the UK.

The analysis begins from the top with the policy pertaining to data collection and use. Between the post-Snowden critique, and the push to expand the opportunities for surveillance, the analysis describes how different jurisdictions have moved in different policy directions. Some countries have increased their state surveillance powers; others have decreased them. The chapter then turns into a critical examination of debates and issues in relation to the 2016 Investigatory Powers Act in the UK, which ‘maintained, and in parts, expanded state surveillance powers’ (p. 80).

This part of the book is based on various sources of data such as policy documents, stakeholder statements and qualitative interviews with parliamentarians, security and law enforcement experts and representatives of the industry and the civil society. One conclusion from this analysis is that the individual citizen’s perspective had been rather absent in the framing of the policy. Instead, ideology and prevailing power relations were far more important for how the policy was framed. This should not come as a surprise to anyone, but the chapter is valuable in displaying the complexity of discourses and interests during this multi-stakeholder policy process.

The subsequent Chapter 5, about media discourses, is where Hintz et al. (on the basis of the analysis of media coverage and interviewing journalists) explore how practices associated with data collection for analytical purposes have come to be justified and normalized in the mainstream media. In their attempts to present how these practices have become normalized in a post-Snowden setting, several fascinating issues are covered. These include the journalists’ actual perceptions and attitudes to the development compared to what they actually report; the emphasis of surveillance among political elites versus ordinary people; the differences between mainstream newspapers and the digital native organizations; and ‘surveillance realism’ – the view of surveillance as inevitable.

How does the public in general relate to all this? In Chapters 5 and 6 the authors turn to view mass collection and data processing from a bottom-up perspective borne by interviews with members of the public and activists. One conclusion is that the media discourse of normalization has influenced the citizens in the sense they remain pretty silent. But instead of viewing this as something positive – ‘good health is quiet’ – the book digs deeper into various issues. One is ‘the chilling effects’ – the idea that state surveillance can deter people from exercising their democratic freedoms online. Considering that the existence of chilling effects is disputed, the last word in the debate is probably not said yet. However, the authors present a good case that the conditions for digital engagement and resistance are changing in times of datafication.

Another thought-provoking aspect brought up in the book is the disconnection between digital rights and other social justice agendas. Even though there has been protests and various forms of resistance towards surveillance, data concerns have ‘come to be pursued separately from broader social justice issues’ (p. 143). This is something the authors argue constitutes one important limitation regarding the possibilities for dissent and resistance.

While considering potential limitations of the book, the case selection comes first to mind. On the one hand, the specific context of the Snowden leaks sheds new light on many general developments in digital technologies and the function of data in society. In many ways it is a revealing case, an unbeatable eye-opener. On the other hand, there are limitations in relation to the overarching aim of the book. One is that surveillance tends to overshadow other critical issues and thereby narrows the discussion. The notion of ‘Digital citizenship in a datafied society’ somewhat turns into ‘Surveillance and digital citizenship’.

Another limitation arises in relation to the analyses of the social, economic and political forces shaping the overall development. Discourses of security are essential for our understanding of contemporary

practices, the authors argue, providing ‘a trump card’ overriding all other claims (p. 88). Yet, many areas where governments have begun to monitor, categorize, sort and profile citizens are not related to security. Here, other concerns might be of greater importance, which are not really touched upon. One competing candidate is what Susskind and Susskind (2015) call ‘the more-for-less challenge’. Many public institutions are being asked to deliver more service with fewer resources at their disposal. Improving and cutting back costs makes it attractive to automate some decisions that currently require human judgement, but could just as well have been processed by a computer. And I am sure there are plenty of other driving forces. The point here is that context matters – while the Snowden leaks provides one important context, it does not stand alone.

Finally, a similar point can be made in relation to the analysis of how citizens understand their new digital environment. In a recent report, the Pew Research Center (2018) shows that Americans express broad concern over the fairness and effectiveness of computer software making important decisions in people’s lives. However, their survey also highlights the ways in which Americans’ attitudes towards algorithmic decision-making depend heavily on the context of those decisions and the characteristics of the people who might be affected. Context matters, also for citizens. Similar technologies can be conceived with support or distrust depending on the circumstances.

That being said, these critical remarks are minor alongside the merits of the book. Perhaps this is not a book (which the title might suggest) for those who are looking for a well-structured introduction to all the central issues relating to digital citizenship in a datafied society. Furthermore, this is probably not a book for anyone searching for a summary of key developments concerning how big data is collected, analyzed and used throughout the public administration. However, this is definitely a book for those who are interested in understanding some of the significant changes in governance that has taken place, and the implications for a digital citizenship.

The authors’ criticism of the traditional conceptions of digital citizenship are sharp and thought-provoking. Another strength of the book is that it captures both top-down and bottom-up dimensions of datafication. Also, alongside showing that there are some structural barriers for enhancing digital citizenships, it also spurs a debate on how to overcome them. This is a true challenge for democracies. Can they continue to evolve and increase the ability of citizens to control their lives? Can citizens be provided with means to restore the balance vis-à-vis government and major corporations in the datafied society? If so, how?

References

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