

Jean Burgess, Kath Albury, Anthony McCosker, and Rowan Wilken, **Everyday Data Cultures**, Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2022, 160 pp., \$22.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by

Karin Bogdanova

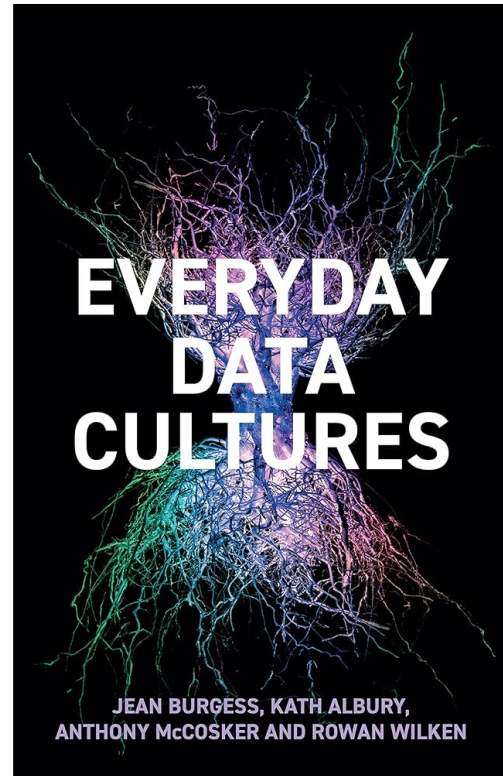
Delft University of Technology

Narratives about Big Data and AI (artificial intelligence) embedded themselves in the collective imaginary of the future—the future that is aspirational and desirable. These discourses are infused with techno-solutionist and techno-optimistic argumentation, where digital transformation and technological intervention are seen as the most appropriate tools to address—if not “fix”—current social, economic, and environmental problems. As much as science and technology studies scholars attempt to popularize anti-deterministic framing, the myth of AI as a disembodied, ubiquitous, and autonomous actor, which shapes our present and future, prevails.

It appears that even the counternarratives get equally co-opted by Big Tech to fit its vision. In their book, **Everyday Data Cultures**, social scientists and communication scholars Jean Burgess, Kath Albury, Anthony McCosker, and Rowan Wilken thus put under question the current framing employed by “Big Critique.” Affiliated with the Australian Research Council Centre of

Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, their work is a contribution to the growing field of critical data studies. The authors argue that the critique of digitalization, when marked by dystopian and alarmist attitudes, continues to reproduce the rhetoric of digital sublime while attributing meaningful agency solely to Big Tech actors. Consequently, adversarial practices and counter-tactics of everyday users are underplayed and understudied by many critical big data and AI researchers. As Beer and Burrows (2013) have similarly pointed out, “we know little about how the performativity of data circulation, the social life of data, feeds into the performance of subjectivity and the constitution of everyday experiences” (p. 68). The ambition of *Everyday Data Cultures* is to encourage scholars in critical data studies and beyond to challenge the representation of users as passive consumers and further explore sites and modes of their interactions with data. Authors call for further analytical and empirical investigation into more vernacular forms of user participation in technology development, implementation, appropriation, and meaning-making.

Burgess and colleagues propose *everyday data cultures* as a framework that develops scholarly sensitivity toward the everyday as an object of study and as a site where people’s quotidian messy encounters with data take place. Importantly, it encourages viewing data as cultural and ordinary, which should inform future empirical methodologies, but also as relational. That implies that the existing narratives



that picture users as passive audiences or victims of data biases are not just unproductive but also inaccurate. Whereas any platform power does not exist without resistance toward it (Bonini & Treré, 2024), the proposed framework suggests looking further than refusal and active political confrontation as responses to encroaching datafication. Instead, transformative and contestational practices placed in the everyday manifest through subverting expected use, appropriating the embedded affordances, and even collectively expressing discontent at the unfulfilled promises and ungrounded claims. The authors draw up three separate yet interlinked arenas where these take place: *intimacies*, *literacies*, and *publics*. Each chapter traces novel conceptual vocabularies related to described sites and practices and illustrates them with nontrivial cases.

In each chapter, the authors outline their interpretations of the key terms. Thus, in chapter 1, they appropriate a broader understanding of intimacy as knowledge of oneself and others and the establishment of trusting relations that stem from that knowledge. As such, technologies are argued to transform social ecologies by mediating our sex life, personal health, and even parenting. Moreover, the chapter expands the discourse on digital platforms as an essential element of contemporary identity-making. The authors foreground the situations when these platforms fail to provide appropriate space and functionalities for the representation and performance of one's selfhood. Where Crawford (2014) argues that big data invokes the feeling of *surveillant anxiety*, a fear of both disclosing too much personal information through data and being misrepresented by data, Burgess and colleagues depict users as more empowered. The authors highlight that these mismatches do not go unnoticed as users seek ways to circumvent existing affordances to reflect their identity properly.

To do so, however, people need to possess sufficient data literacy to comprehend the logic of the algorithms and platforms to manipulate them. The key concept of chapter 2, *literacies*, appears to be central to the whole argument of the book, as it eventually weaves into other chapters. Namely, both the engagement in intimate data practices and data publics requires a model for making sense of data and ways of interacting with it. Instead of individual relations with data and algorithms, the authors assert that literacies are collective manifestations, defining them as "resources for public connection and belonging" (p. 88). This understanding further conveys the picture of the everyday use of technologies as the quotidian contestation of human ingenuity and autonomy versus mechanistic and corporate logics. In this chapter and throughout the book, the authors stress the inherently political component of these collective discourses and interactions with data. Moreover, this chapter provides some clarifications on what characterizes *everyday* data practices: These practices have limitations in terms of mobilized resources (technical, temporal, etc.), whereas the expertise they employ mostly originates from informal sources (collective knowledge sharing and folk theories that stem from it).

Chapter 5 further complicates the notion of the *user* and the *community*. Burgess and colleagues argue that these terms, while generative, poorly address relational aspects of data cultures and the political agency of collectives. As an alternative, the authors provide a concept of *everyday data publics*. The term is reminiscent of Baym and boyd's (2012) *social media publics*, which are characterized as "shaped by architecture and affordances of social media, but also by people's social contexts, identities, and practices" (p. 32). While in the chapter on literacy users were attributed only so much power in transforming the status quo, here the authors attest to ground-up initiatives (where users "act as publics" [p. 142]) having sufficient

capacity to challenge dominant practices. Data themselves are defined as inherently political—both as an object of politics and a resource to drive them. Data work, in turn, becomes central not only in the conversations on the production of AI but also in everyday practices.

In conclusion, the authors assert that the everyday is capable of disenchanting the technological sublime, rendering algorithms, data, and platforms material (as opposed to digital and abstract) and thus malleable. The logics of Big Tech as an oppressive, all-pervasive, and uncompromising force is juxtaposed with the collective power of situated practices, mundane contestations, and vernacular knowledges. As Burgess and colleagues argue, the acknowledgment of and respect for the autonomy and transformative capacities of everyday users cultivate an alternative hopeful vision for data futures. Instead of grand narratives, either utopian or dystopian, the focus on everyday data cultures unravels grounded, lively, and synergistic encounters and interactions with technology.

The book's ambition is to put forward a theoretical framework or, as the authors position it, a mode of attention. As the authors admit, the ambiguity of everyday as a site and its theoretical articulations have often left it disregarded by scholars. The central conceptual apparatus of this book similarly appears as rather intuitive and fuzzy. As such, the boundaries of "everydayness" and who can be considered actors of such everyday practices can be difficult to grasp: For instance, the cases authors use for illustration include Lil Nas X, sex workers, professional data journalists, and activists. While those cases indeed present curious and insightful instances of data counter-tactics, they dim the narratives of the mundane, spontaneous, yet transformative routines that ordinary users collectively engage in within their day-to-day realities. In many respects, Burgess and colleagues simply call for a more anthropological approach that focuses on micropractices and the mutual engagement between institutions and the organization of social and material worlds. Indeed, anthropology as a discipline might have been historically most comfortable with the notion of the everyday, both analytically and methodologically.

While not providing conceptual clarity, this book appeals instead with its perspective shift toward research on everyday data practices as a battleground between users' ingenuity and agency and corporate and algorithmic logics. It encourages an inquiry into grounded, lived accounts of people's datafied quotidian realities. By doing so, Burgess and colleagues aim to outset not only Big Tech's pervasive mythography but also some despondent accounts of the critics of the former. The book unfolds in front of its readers a tapestry of alternative sociotechnical practices, mundane discourses, and analytical categories that, while seeming small, in their collective power emerge as effectual tactics of contestation and resistance. *Everyday Data Cultures* will be useful for general audiences that are curious about digital technologies broadly, students of varied disciplines just delving into the topic, and researchers of data cultures interested in empirical studies.

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