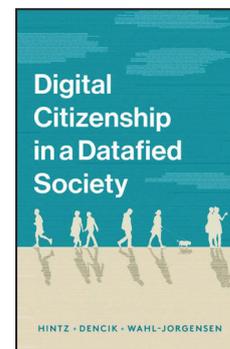


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Digital citizenship: between active participation and mass surveillance

Since the late 1990s, the amount of data generated, gathered and processed daily basis has increased in an unprecedented way. Digitisation and datafication of everyday life, or in other words, converting our everyday activities into data using digital technologies, is now a growing trend. This not only generates tracking people's activities and behaviour on the web, but also tracking "analogue" activities and behaviours, which, paradoxically, we already often refer to as the offline world.

New big data processing technologies have become a core asset in our societies. More and more public and private institutions are making use of big data analysis. The recent COVID-19 crisis makes it clear that the commitment to the use of algorithms and artificial intelligence techniques is full. Nevertheless, the development of these technologies is very much affected by the commercial interests of big tech corporations.

Edward Snowden's revelations in 2013 marked a turning point in public perception of big data exploitation. The former NSA worker not only put the risks of mass surveillance in the spotlight, but also sparked the debate on how these data processing processes would modify the very sphere of citizenship.

The book *Digital Citizenship in a Datafied Society* focuses on this scenario to understand the consequences of datafication and to address a question that is essential these days: How can we understand citizenship in a society marked by big data gathering and processing?

Hintz, Dencik and Wahl-Jorgensen, the authors, are also co-directors of the Data Justice Lab, a centre that belongs to Cardiff University. The Lab studies the relationship between datafication and social justice and, more particularly, policies related to data exploitation processes and the implications of their institutional and corporate uses.

This book is the result of a two-year research project entitled *Digital Citizenship and Surveillance Society: UK State-Media-*

Citizen Relations After the Snowden Leaks and has insights from the Surveillance and Citizenship international congress, held within the framework of this project.

The authors argue that, in the current context of big data exploitation, traditional conceptions of citizenship are threatened by datafication and surveillance practices, which people cannot control individually. Therefore, they say, these should be thoroughly reviewed. Either the traditional conception of citizenship as a relationship of rights and obligations between the state and citizens, or other more current conceptions of digital citizenship, focusing on the potential of new technologies for networked participation and influence on decisions that affect one's life.

The book analyses social, political and discursive contexts and legal frameworks in which the new citizenship is constructed, with special attention to the case of the United Kingdom, where the research is carried out. It highlights the importance of paying attention to social, economic and political forces that shape the meaning of digital citizenship today, and also to norms and ideologies that support it and practices that contest it. A key aspect to understand these issues, the authors say, is to comprehend how the different parties involved in the redefining citizenship process relate to each other and what discourse they promote.

The research carried out by Hintz, Dencik and Wahl-Jorgensen uses different methodologies, including focus groups, interviews, content and discourse analysis, as well as political and legal documents. British citizens, journalists, politicians, experts, engineers and activists are taking part in it.

The book is divided into six chapters:

The first, *Citizenship in a Digital Age*, concludes that current conceptions of digital citizenship, particularly focused on the "empowering" role of digital technologies, are limited by surveillance, organisation and content restriction practices. In the current scenario, they say, digital citizens are both active and monitored citizens whose civic identity is constructed partly in a conscious and voluntary manner and partly with the

digital and involuntary tracking of their behaviour. Therefore, the authors call for special attention to the complex structures that determine our use of digital tools.

The second chapter, *Datafication and Surveillance*, analyses the concepts and practices that define the current data processing scenario and their implications for construction of citizenship. Due to the proliferation of analysis tools, data has an increasing weight on how decisions affecting citizens' lives are made. However, data surveillance, the authors argue, makes us more visible to those who control information flows, while at the same time keeping them in an increasingly obscure position, so that we no longer know who can see what about us and ourselves.

The third chapter, *Regulating Datafication*, analyses how the legal and political frameworks that define the dimensions of digital citizenship are forged, focusing on the (unequal) influence of the different parties involved. This section also reflects on how the content of legal texts and recent trends in this field affect the shaping of a particular form of digital citizenship.

The fourth chapter, *Mediating Digital Citizenship*, examines the role of media discourses in generating certain debates on datafication, data exploitation practices and related public policies. It explains how while certain discourses and visions of reality are ignored, others, which normalise abusive data exploitation practices, emerge strongly in the public imagination, thanks to a privileged treatment in the media. The authors highlight, to the contrary, the role of new digital social media in disseminating more critical perspectives on the impact of datafication.

The fifth chapter, *Understanding and Negotiating Digital Environments*, investigates public opinion and reception of these media discourses. Hintz, Dencik and Wahl-Jorgensen observe signs of resistance to datafication, but also the start of a "sociology of digital resignation". Due to a "chilling effect" produced by the extent of surveillance and feelings of inadequacy, people resign themselves to current data exploitation practices, considering them a new and inevitable "way of life". This is what they call the "realism of surveillance".

The last chapter, *Challenging Datafication*, highlights that this scenario has unleashed new practices of contestation and resistance to sophisticated forms of control and surveillance by individuals and civil society. The authors, however, emphasise that the structural limitations identified throughout the book make it difficult for them to succeed in a decisive way. In particular, they highlight the obstacle posed by disconnection between social rights agendas and political and legislative actions with respect to data exploitation technologies.

To conclude the essential discussion that they propose in this book, Hintz, Dencik and Wahl-Jorgensen point to the need to rethink digital citizenship, from an approach that takes into account the practices, infrastructures and consequences of datafication, and also the political dimensions of big data technologies, not only as a technical instrument, but also as a

process that is at the heart of the different power structures that make up society.

Further information:

DATA JUSTICE LAB [website]. <https://datajusticelab.org/>.