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Objectivity vs affect: how competing forms of legitimacy can polarize public debate in data-driven public consultation

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ABSTRACT

How do data and objectivity become politicized? How do processes intended to include citizen voices instead push them into social media that intensify negative expression? This paper examines the possibility and limits of 'agonistic data practices' (Crooks & Currie, 2021) examining how data-driven consultation practices create competing forms of legitimacy for quantifiable knowledge and affective lived experience. Drawing on a two-year study of a private Facebook group self-presenting as a supportive space for working-class people critical of the development of 'low-traffic neighbourhoods' (LTNs), the paper reveals how the dynamics of 'affective polarization' associated the use of data with elite and exclusionary politics. Participants addressed this by framing their online contributions as 'vernacular data' and also by associating numerical data with exclusion and inequality. Over time the strong statements of feeling began to support content of a conspiratorial nature, reflected at the social level of discourse in the broader media environment where stories of strong feeling gain legitimacy in right-wing sources. The paper concludes that ideologies of dataism and practices of datafication may create conditions for political extremism to develop when the potential conditions of 'agonistic data practices' are not met, and that consultation processes must avoid overly valorizing data and calculable knowledge if they wish to retain democratic accountability.

Introduction: data-driven consultation and the case of low traffic neighbourhood planning

How did traffic planning create conspiracy theory? In 2022 and early 2023, a conspiracy theory broke out of online discussion and crashed into electoral politics. This conspiracy is known as the 'fifteen-minute city' – a phrase which refers to an urban planning concept of situating a range of services within a fifteen-minute walk or cycle from most homes. In the conspiratorial version, the 'fifteen minute city' is a means through which a shadowy elite will exercise control of individual movement: a mechanism whereby people will be

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PREVENTED from leaving their neighbourhood. In February 2023 the 'fifteen-minute city' was referred to in the UK Parliament as 'an international socialist concept that will cost us our freedom' (Nurse, Calafiore & Dunning, 2023). Extensive media coverage of the conspiracy followed, including coverage of a protest in Oxford where placards reportedly read 'The 15-minute . . . ghettoes are not about climate, it's tyrannical control' and 'Say NO to the new world order. Say no to 15 mins prison cities. Wake up, people, wake up' (Partington, 2023).

The protests in Oxford were targeted at a traffic planning mechanism called 'Low-Traffic-Neighbourhoods' or LTNs. These mechanisms use restrictions on motor vehicles (including closure of some roads to through-traffic) to address issues of unsafe traffic, air pollution and climate change. They have been commonly used in the UK for the last twenty years, and in 2020 and 2021 many local governments began moving forward on LTN plans intended to help them meet climate change goals and reduce air pollution. Previous LTN installations had been proven to make streets safer and reduce traffic (Aldred et al., 2019) and align with broadly-held public support for addressing air pollution (London Councils, 2020). Many have achieved these aims (Laverty and Aldred, 2021; Thomas and Aldred, 2023). Figure 1 illustrates some of the street furniture often used in inner London LTNs.

Previous research (Rodgers, 2022; Rodgers and Moore, 2020) discusses the relationship between social media and online discussions of these traffic planning proposals in terms of the capacity for agonism, or productive political disagreement (see Mouffe, 2016). The productive disagreement of agonism is distinct from antagonism, which refers

Figure 1. Example of street furniture used in an LTN in inner London. Author's photo .

to active hostility. Many theories of democratic practice assume that productive disagreement is necessary for democracy to function within contexts of diversity (Mouffe, 2016; Westfal, 2022). This paper examines the fragility of that agonism, in the context of reliance on quantifiable data and objective knowledge. Drawing on a two-year-long observation of a closed Facebook group established in one area of inner London following frustrations with online consultations on LTNs, the paper examines the capacity for this group (self-identified as a 'diverse group of [borough] residents adversely affected and deeply concerned by the impact of LTN schemes') to facilitate democratic engagement, including 'agonistic data practice' (Crooks & Currie, 2021) – the use of data to generate productive political disagreement.

In this article I analyse the extent to which such agonistic practice is influenced or even undermined by a perception that quantifiable or objective data is more valid than feeling. As I discover, efforts to both engage and manage participation in online consultation intensify associations between quantifiable and objectifiable data and legitimacy. The resulting 'affective polarization' – a politics of distrust and dehumanization of others – associates objective data with oppression, and draws on suspicion of politicians to create dehumanizing narratives about them. In the case examined here, the insular nature of closed Facebook groups and the internal dynamics of the platform encouraged expressions of strong feelings to circulate away from formal consultation spaces. While previous research has suggested that this strong feeling could potentially contribute to productive disagreement, this study investigates how the move towards online and data-driven consultation displaces feeling into social media spaces that can circulate and foreground discourses of distrust and dehumanization of others.

Background

This research began with participation in an online consultation meeting discussing a pilot project to close roads in an area of inner London. The meeting became heated; the mute button was employed by the moderators after some participants made lengthy critical points. One of the participants typed in the chat box that anyone who wanted to talk about the issues more should join a Facebook group where there could be more discussion. The meeting ended after its permitted hour and I joined the Facebook group with a plan to monitor how this discussion might contribute to research on media use and participation in 'smart cities' (Powell, 2021). Previous research on media use in relation to LTN consultation has focused on the ambient quality of social media in these debates, suggesting that Twitter, Facebook, and the online consultation platform Commonplace all create different temporalities of participation, providing a slow backdrop to other consultation events including town hall meetings and walks (Rodgers and Moore, 2020). In the 2020 data-driven consultation process, pandemic restrictions changed both the temporality of online platforms as well as the policy apparatus under which decisions were made: official public consultations shifted online, and planners used provisions for 'emergency' installation of some low traffic neighbourhoods, meaning consultations focused on whether to maintain pilot road closure and traffic management projects that were already installed. The online consultation employed a combination of online surveys, public meetings and co-production exercises undertaken on the Commonplace online platform. Commonplace is a UK-based platform that allows
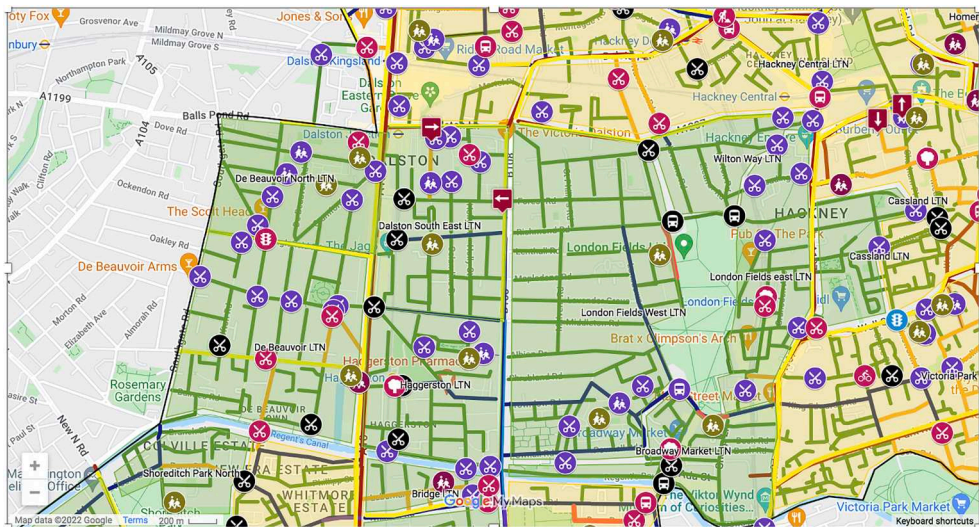
Figure 2. Sample edited Commonplace Map: Hackney cycling campaign.

participants to add comments to a digital map. In previous consultations, it remained 'open' to comment from a variety of points of view: the heavily annotated map of the London borough of Hackney (Figure 2) illustrates the potential for contribution from participants comfortable with this form of digital engagement. A more typical form of engagement, drawn from the Commonplace website gallery is Figure 3, illustrating how negative comments are normally appended to the map. Commonplace provides features that allow for filtering and management of comments before maps are published, meaning that not all contributions appear.

Figure 3. Example of Commonplace commenting function: Commonplace.is.

Twitter and Facebook have played different roles in LTN policy-making. Rodgers and Moore point out that Twitter has no ge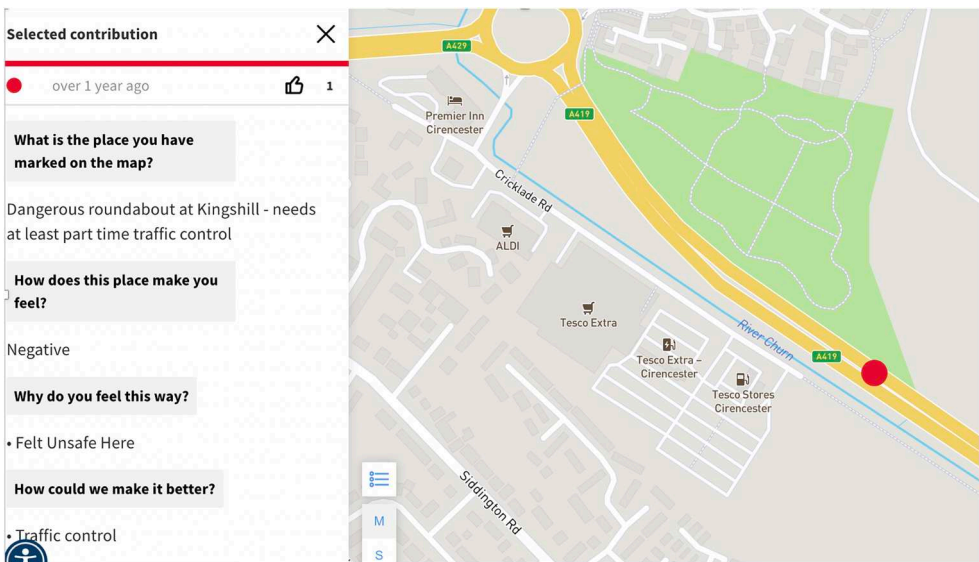ographic focus and in their study, 'the platform was dominated by cycling campaigners and key politicians. While we found many instances of acrimonious exchanges on the platform, Twitter appeared to be a locus for campaigners and politicians to consolidate their support for the scheme or expand their network' (p. 4).

Meanwhile, Facebook groups like the one mentioned in the meeting I attended used the names of particular neighbourhoods in their group names, and welcomed contributions from people whose spelling, grammar, word use and tone signaled a wider range of educational and class backgrounds than the more formal discussions then taking place on Twitter. Unlike public Twitter, most of the Facebook groups were closed and required members to send a short statement about themselves to the group moderator. The design of Facebook has been criticized both by insiders and researchers for making more extreme (including angrier) content more visible (Haugen, 2021; Kalsnes & Ihlebæk, 2021). Rodgers' previous research has suggested that in the media ecology of LTN disputes, Facebook has in the past acted as an 'ambient' media space alongside other discussions taking place in person. However, in the early phases of my research Facebook was a place to mobilize participation in consultation as well as critique of the process, particularly the data-driven aspects of it. On Facebook, participants used language and personal anecdote that were not present on the more formal and differently class-marked discussions on Twitter. Over time the discussions on the Facebook group changed: first through making efforts at having individual experiences appear as legitimate data, and second, towards making emotionally driven claims legitimate on their own, especially when these claims reflected marginalized identities. These claims contrast with the way data-driven consultation results are presented and can align to more politically polarized media narratives including conspiracy theories.

Moore and Rodgers report that during their research on LTN-related discussions in 2016, Facebook 'exchanges often centred on disputes about the value of cycling and its possible ties with encroaching gentrification. These disputes exemplified increasingly familiar forms of contemporary political division, for example, between middle class/working class, elite/ordinary, young/old and facts/emotions' (2020, p. 3). The intensification of these disputes against the backdrop of data-driven consultation and the shrinking of spaces of agonistic exchange illustrate the importance of addressing the questions central to this paper:

- How do ideologies of dataism and practices of datafication influence the perceived legitimacy of citizen contributions to public consultation?
- How do citizens leverage different forms of legitimacy for their contributions to consultations?
- What is the impact of this for agonistic data practices?

Creating calculable and objective data: dataism and datafication

Data-driven consultations are intended to increase efficiency in public services while also supporting democratic practice (Nesti, 2018). The combination of intensive use of data

with appeals to citizen knowledge creates tensions around how particular kinds of knowledge are made visible and valued within this process. Van Dijck (2014) identifies *dataism* as an ideology which accords high value to knowledge and information rendered as data, and *datafication* as the practice of the transformation of life into dat. Dataism has transformed many aspects of the social landscape. In the civic space, it has justified reframing civic participation as contributing data to online conversations and deliberation, as well as producing 'objective' commentary on policy proposals (Choque et al., 2019). These calculable and objective forms of knowledge, often referred to as 'civic innovation' (Savell et al., 2015) are given legitimacy and validity through the ideology of dataism. Relatedly, the practice of *datafication* transforms citizen views into data, which increasingly constitutes the mode through which citizens' opinions become legible, and hence legitimate. Within data-driven consultation, legitimacy accrues to contributions that are either quantifiable or objectifiable (Wilson, 2011). The ideology and practice of dataism and datafication legitimize quantification and embed it into practice. This means that numbers, data and anything computable become more legitimate.

Data and social legitimacy

In social theory, legitimacy is understood as socially constructed (Lister, 2003). With the increasing significance of dataism, data are now also the subject and object of this social construction, and become legitimate through processes of standardization and objectification (Wilson, 2011). Data, according to Wilson, can, 'decontextualize, depoliticize, and ultimately qualify certain lives . . . concerns about neighbourhood quality-of-life are geocoded, become data, and made legitimate' (2010, p. 858). People's observations of their world are most legitimate when they are data that can be categorized or coded categorization or coding; counted or managed. Data are legitimate because they can be 'read' or processed.

Data-driven or 'smart' consultation strategies often invite participation through completion of surveys, online consultations or collaborative editing of online documents such as maps. Citizens are exhorted to participate in urban governance by interrogating government data, analysing data they collect from their networks or 'providing personal subjective observations . . . and applying expertise from their personal local experiences' (Roche, 2017 p. 662). As Shannon Mattern points out, as urban planning shifts towards the use of sensor data streams and other 'smart governance' techniques, participation from citizens can become performative: 'participation' is now deployed as part of a public performance wherein the *aesthetics* of collaboration signify democratic process, without always providing the real thing. (2020, n.p.). Participatory exercises can become 'engagement theatre' (Wiley, cited in Mattern, 2020) – demonstrative without being meaningful.

The double bind of datafication within marginalized communities

For marginalized communities, datafication of public consultation produces what Crooks and Currie (2021) refer to as a 'double bind' whereby marginalized groups feel pressure both to represent their views using data, while also contesting its validity. Since these groups often suffer negative consequences as a result of data-driven decisions, the double-bind of both making data present as well as critiquing it can be substantial.

They argue that it is necessary, however, because of the 'consensus model' of policy decision-making, which assumes that contribution to consultation processes indicates support for them. The practice of democratic, participatory urban governance is often schematized as a ladder (Arnstein, 1969) or a spectrum (IAP2, 2007) of participation ranging from using data to educate or empower (Nabatchi, 2012) to using data to involve citizens in decision-making (Cardullo and Kitchin, 2016).

Crooks and Currie argue that 'agonistic data practice' can be a way to address the double bind of datafication, because of the potential for agonistic practices to permit data-based decisions to encounter narratives of broader experience as well as to challenge the ways that marginalized communities are 'done to' through data. Drawing from the work of Chantal Mouffe, Crooks and Currie (2021) identify how marginalized communities might escape from the double bind by engaging with data in an agonistic mode: drawing on its affective and narrative potential to reframe debates and introduce contentious or challenging dynamics. Mouffe writes, 'in a democratic society where pluralism is not envisaged in the harmonious anti-political form, and where the ever-present possibility of antagonism is taken into account, representative institutions (by giving form to the division of society) play a crucial role in allowing for the institutionalization of this conflictual dimension. However, such a role can only be fulfilled through the availability of an agonistic confrontation.' (2016, n.p.). Agonistic data practices suggest a focus on difference, on conflict, and on considering a wide range of different forms of knowledge as relevant. Crooks and Currie advocate a research agenda focused on agonistic data practices that 'could be of use for addressing questions in urban studies about how community organizations confront problems of social justice in light of increased datafication of space' (p. 210).

Conflict, tension and negative affect are part of agonistic debate, but can also indicate antagonism and the breakdown of democracy. The balance between these two concerns the quality of legitimacy. As Savell et al write, 'Political theorists have shown that marginalized people .. use conflict and disrupt accepted norms to claim increased recognition' (p. 3), and through recognition, legitimacy. Two aspects of legitimacy are part of the potential for agonistic data practices: a 'first-order' legitimacy which concerns the extent to which a group's claims can align with the kind of knowledge valued within the exercise. In this context, gaining legitimacy in this way means making objective, calculable data. A 'second-order' legitimacy does the opposite: foregrounds the legitimacy acquired by people by virtue of their marginalized identity. In this study, these two forms of legitimacy complicate the capacity for agonistic data practices.

Method

I observed discussions in a private Facebook group from 2020 to June 2022. The group, with about 2000 members is typical of social media spaces that stand in for and restructure local geographic communities (see Kurwa, 2019 & Lambright, 2019). However, the group does not represent a specific local neighbourhood. Rather, it uses the name of a London borough in its group identifier, which during my study included several LTN projects. The group included nearly daily posts, including photographs and shared links, with most content generated by the group moderator and a few others. In my findings, all quotations from the group are paraphrased, images are sourced outside

the group and geographic information is removed to protect the identities of the contributors.[1]

I conducted a first round of thematic analysis and a subsequent discourse analysis of material collected within each theme. The thematic analysis was continuous and discourse analysis was conducted in 2022. Adapting Fairclough and Chouliaraki's (1999) approach to apply to situated actions within specific media (Jones et al., 2015), I examined three different levels at which data and objective knowledge are legitimated: the social/interpersonal level, the formal/institutional level and the societal level. I considered how argumentation was employed to legitimize the inclusion or exclusion of others and the extent to which these points of view are overtly put forward (Wodak, 2006; Van Dijck, 2014). I situated these interactions within a broader social frame (Fairclough & Chouliaraki, 1999) which included the reports of findings from official consultation processes and the mass media coverage of LTNs and related issues. The analysis is focused on the way that the group posts claimed, and framed, the legitimacy of their concerns and the ways this connects with broader discourses. The extent to which these concerns were substantiated by other sources of knowledge varies. As the findings reveal, claims from this Facebook group played into dynamics of that valorized legitimacy of numerical data in some contexts and affective stories in others. This legitimacy occurs separately from whether any of the claims are factually correct.

Findings

The findings identify how the discussions on the closed Facebook group evolved over time to include aspects of affective polarization that align with broader conspiratorial narratives present across the UK media environment, illustrating the challenges to agonistic data practices.

Theme 1: critique of data-based consultation

In 2020 the discussions mainly consisted of criticism of how consultation processes took place. Online consultation was discussed as being exclusionary, and members of the group even suggested that using Commonplace was allowing the local government to manipulate the consultation data to minimize dissent. In a pattern typical of comment threads in this group, a discussion about the functionality of the consultation material and the representativeness of data quickly devolved into a heated critique of the government's decisions and even its legitimacy, interspersed with dramatic framings of the personal experiences of marginalized people and personal attacks against politicians, particularly London Mayor Sadiq Khan:

> GG: I looked through the comments and they talk about 'rat running[2]' making roads dangerous. My neighbors left comments but I can't see them. I don't trust these surveys.
>
> AL: There is a pro-LTNer in the area of that map. I am sure he has been adding lots of his points as soon as he could.
>
> BP: The usual. Saying they don't feel safe cycling. Worried about rat running. Bullshit.

MM: This is nothing less than evil doings on people's life creating false reports to make money from fines and from European green parties in grants and bonuses. They are all corrupt.

EP: vote them out.

MM: yes but they are all corrupt can't trust them and I'm sickened that Khan got back in – who voted for him? Pensioners are locked in and loss use of their legs no understanding of the internet.

Participants also critiqued the use of participatory mapping as a consultation strategy, suggesting that the use of these participatory tools was performative rather than consultative:

GG – On these maps you can post more than one comment. It's not clear that's how it works and obviously some people are taking it as far as they can.

MR – Dont' they only count one if it's from the same name?

GG – That's not what I have been told. They just make up the rules, changing it all the time.

GG – They called this map 'unrepresentative', just because it was clear that most of the entries were critical of the LTN project.

Participants also offered more pointed critiques of official data, including critiques of the representativeness of official data as well as critiques of data processing. For example, part of the consultation process involved the local government distributing surveys aimed at determining support for new LTNs within the borough. When the survey results were released suggesting support for the new LTNs, Facebook group members acquired the raw survey data that included the post codes of all of the respondents. They created a map showing that a large number of people responding to the survey did so using post codes outside of the area where the LTN would be installed, and posted this map with a comment expressing outrage at this apparently illegitimate consultation. There are two facets to this critique: first, a concern about the use of surveys and the robustness of the survey sample and method, and second an implicit valorization of local or situated knowledge, in line with which only residents of a particular area could legitimately claim to be impacted by traffic closures within it. These two aspects develop the reactive critique of the consultation maps, by identifying how datafied, objective responses to consultations were solicited so that they could align with existing policy narratives, while also adding a second aspect: an appeal to the legitimacy of local or situated experience.

Group members also critiqued the way that the outcomes or benefits of LTNs were presented, focusing specifically on the way that consultation reports and research publications that used quantifiable data: 'All of the data used to set up and keep runnin an LTN is based on faulty collection. They use percentages when counting cyclists so that if there were 4 cyclists and 4 more started going down that road it's a 100 per cent increase. But for cars they use numbers so it looks like more have vanished from using the road. Any lie will do for these zealots.' This comment combines a methodological critique of the presentation of quantified data with an affective statement that calls into question the credibility of the government.

As the local government extended LTNs through 2020 and 2021, discussions moved from critique of consultation to discussion and coordination of active dissent. Group

members coordinated to print and display signs opposing the introduction of LTNs, with the group moderator taking photographs of his son with signs in various locations. Images of the protest signs were used as the visual background for the group page and the repetitive image of a tall young Black man standing next to signs posted in different locations reiterated a connection between opposition to LTNs and a marginalized identity. This kind of 'vernacular data' didn't claim objectivity, instead gaining legitimacy from connection to local sites and experiences. Similarly, group members shared photographs taken from their car dashboards or from top decks of buses showing congested traffic, framing these images as overlooked data illustrating the actual experience of the LTN policies and adding comments like 'Used to be ten minutes to get to this junction but now it's 30' or 'Yesterday tried to take my mum to the clinic, traffic was so bad we missed the appointment.' These photographs juxtapose 'vernacular data' against the purportedly illegitimate official data, without identifying any connection with 'official' data. Figures 4 illustrates this type of image.

Over time, critiques of data and efforts at 'vernacular data collection' became enmeshed within broader populist discourses, with the group moderator using comment threads to encourage voting in the local election against the incumbent left-wing party and for a right-wing party that promised to remove LTNs.

Comments also used increasingly polarized language to describe the 'us' of the LTN opponents in opposition with a mysterious, more privileged 'them': 'These lies about roads, Covid and pollution are false and push an agenda that a few use to better their

Figure 4. Example of vernacular visual data: photograph of road traffic in London. Available at: LambethLTNwatch.org.

lives. While the rest suffer.' Commenters shared real estate listings describing 'exclusive Low-Traffic Neighborhoods' and a short film featuring interviews with a community 'divided' by an LTN, with dialogue including the line 'they have created a border: there is us over here, and them over there.' The hashtag #londonisruined was appended to posts discussing the inequality between the apparent beneficiaries of LTNs (sometimes described as people living in houses rather than apartments, or in 'leafy' areas, where 'leafy' is a coded term for 'wealthy') and those living in apartments on 'boundary roads' at the edges of LTN areas, which were assumed to have worse traffic and air pollution as a result of the policy. At the social and interactional level, the discourse of LTNs leveraged and intensified a sentiment of division, inequality and unfairness. Some members of the group, including the moderator, began to post messages stating that other members might be 'at risk' and 'not safe' because of their views, and that they should post with care lest they be personally targeted.

At the social level of discourse, reports on the first-round (London Borough of Lambeth, 2021) consultation cycles for an LTN similar to those discussed in the Facebook group reveals which kinds of knowledge gain the most legitimacy. Assessment of whether the LTNs were effective was based primarily on traffic monitoring from independent companies. This included automatic traffic counts (which count vehicles), telematic (GPS) data collection and traffic survey data, all of which are quantitative and numeric. Community feedback sources were listed as:

- Speaking to statutory consultees such as the emergency services
- We undertook some face-to-face engagement with local stakeholders
- We undertook virtual engagement with local groups
- We visited and spoke to local businesses
- We heard from local action groups

In addition, people could provide comments by phone, email or Commonplace or via elected representatives (Railton Low Traffic Neighourhood Stage One monitoring Report, 2021). The report listed the numbers of comments made on the Commonplace, and the numbers of emails received. Analysis of comments was used to describe perceived benefits (including less traffic and safer cycling and walking, improved health, and 'positive behaviour') and perceived concerns such as traffic displacement, extended journey times and community division. The report also notes as a concern the lack of engagement with the community and the poor communication of data. There is no direct indication in the report as to how the community comments were balanced with the other data sources, for which an extensive methodological appendix is provided.

The report demonstrates that objectified, quantifiable data retains its legitimacy within LTN policy-making, and that the sense of having particular experiences or strong feelings ignored is understandable given the way that citizen comments (collected only via Commonplace, surveys or emails) are flattened and categorized into benefits and concerns, as if each of the aspects listed in the report carried the same emotional weight. This helps to contextualize the actions taken by the Facebook group to generate 'vernacular' data and to make claims about their marginalization. It also points out the limits of this strategy as other forms of visibility are performed by Facebook group members but not included in the official consultation.

Theme 2: alienation and inequality

The group discussion often linked policy issues with personal experiences of inequality, and with broader narratives of inequality and alienation. In September 2021 one of the members of the LTN group undertook legal proceedings against the local government, arguing that the rollout of LTNs using emergency COVID legislation violated their rights as a disabled person.

In Summer 2021, the Facebook group discussed this case in detail, expressing strong support to the court challenge against the government and crowdfunding for the challenge and subsequent appeal. The court challenge was described as the most effective way to address the potential negative impacts of LTN projects for disabled people. In Autumn 2021 the judicial review concluded that there were no specific violations of the rights applying to 'protected categories' of persons (which includes disability), although the judge's comments suggest that impacts of LTNs have not necessarily been able to fully include issues of inequality – not only of 'protected categories' but other aspects of discrimination. For group members, the failure of the legal challenged generated sentiments of resignation and despair at what was perceived as a 'stitch up' by the government.

This case spurred further discussion on themes of inequality and discrimination, especially a perceived discrimination against poorer people who (it was argued) were more likely to live on main roads and 'boundary roads' and therefore not gain the benefit of reduced traffic. While this claim is not supported by demographic, traffic or air quality data (Laverty et al., 2021), the sense of having been overlooked, discriminated against and being on the losing end of urban improvement policies was a consistent theme, and often echoed in material shared on the page, which included some of the news coverage mentioned above. This comment illustrates this:

> I completed a form saying that there was a lack of consultation for disabled, carers and traders. These schemes only benefit those without a heavily timetabled work life if they have one at all, who wants silence with their morning coffee.

Inequality and alienation needed to be reinforced through 'othering' – although the 'othered' group was somewhat amorphous: people without disabilities, who ride bicycles, work flexibly and not in occupations requiring attendance in person, or who don't like street noise. Many of the conversations on this theme included #londonisruined and used emotive language: describing people who 'live on a fluffy cloud getting everything delivered by cargo bike dreaming of a traffic free city' or 'middle class people pricing us out of buying or renting homes who can afford their home deliveries and taxis.' This sense of the city have been 'ruined' by traffic changes connected with critiques of class-based inequalities, suggesting that reductions in vehicle through-traffic on residential roads were part of an effort to force ethnic minorities and poor people out of inner-city neighbourhoods. The unstable process of othering connects with the third major theme, a delegitimizing of existing politics.

Theme 3: political legitimacy

The most heavily commented threads within the group focused on elected representatives, including a local councillor and London mayor Sadiq Khan. Posters used creative

as well as dismissive language, associating the local area with 'scam/scum', modifying the name of the councillor to include the word 'scary' and making racial slurs against Sadiq Khan. This language play creates the sense of a trusted 'insider' culture, operating against the encroaching 'outsiders' including local elected representatives. For example:

> This could be a life or death issue, so why? So the so called representative can impose their will on the rest of us! I mean the cycle lobby who believes only themselves are concerned about air quality, using false criteria while relying on delivery services using motorized transport and air travel for their holidays!!!!!

The motif of 'life and death' reoccurred frequently. Commentors suggested that the creation and maintenance of LTN schemes would 'send us to an early grave'. This emotive discourse leveraged the idea of survival and inequality as well as the separation between 'us' local residents and the uncertain 'them' – the variously evoked bicycle-riders, local government members or 'young professionals.'

Contributors to the group were hyper-vigilant about the behaviour of elected officials and any potential hypocrisy. When the London mayor drove through an LTN, furious comments suggested that he could not have possibly legitimately won his most recent election. Commentators also consistently suggested that local government officials were corrupt, at one point publishing a diagram with lines drawn between the elected officials and cycling advocacy organizations. This diagram alluded to conspiratorial dynamics between researchers, consultants and government decision-makers, suggesting a group of self-interested 'others'. The emotive language across all of these themes is both labored and repetitive: group participants are aware of the conventions and consequences of Facebook groups and continue to reiterate their anger, frustration, personal experience and connection with 'working class communities, mixed communities . . . disabled and older people'. The self-consciousness of the affective language suggests an anticipation of how it might be read in relation to the broader social-level media discourse.

LTN issues received regular mass-media press coverage between 2020 and 2022, with a difference in how the projects tended to be reported between more different newspapers. Right-wing media's discussions leveraged strongly affective narratives, for example coverage of protests or opposition to the LTN policies, while left-wing newspapers reported data-driven stories summarizing the quantifiably measurable impacts of LTNs (*Guardian* 19 June 2022). Mirroring the movement of the language described above, one right-wing paper published articles claiming 'The way that LTNs have been imposed is not democratic' and 'It's impose them and THEN we will do a consultation. That is not democracy' (*Telegraph*, 29 June 2021). In one article, statistics describing a reduction of vehicle traffic within an LTN were foregrounded with a statement from an opposition politician claiming that the incumbents had 'not listened to people and . ..created more pollution, more congestion'. Continued public discussion of the apparent inequality and marginalization resulting from the (suggested as anti-democratic) introduction of LTNs opened up a broader discursive space at the social level, where the legitimacy of affective stories of alienation and inequality created a space for conspiracy theories focusing on an illegitimate elite creating policies that oppressed 'ordinary people. Below, I outline how this play of legitimacy might have undermined the capacity for agonism and set the stage for conspiracy.

Discussion

Legitimacy and affective polarization

Citizens engaging in the LTN consultation claimed two different kinds of legitimacy. First, they attempted to gain the first-order legitimacy of appearing in the consultation data. It quickly became evident that what they wanted to express about their experience was not going to appear within this data. They responded in two ways. First, by positioning other aspects of experience as data and claiming the same order of legitimacy as the contributions to the consultation invited. This reiterates the features of the double bind of datafication for marginalized communities. This was evidenced in the critiques of consultation and complaints that people couldn't see themselves in the data being used to justify the LTNs. Second, citizens claimed legitimacy by leveraging authenticity through evocation of membership in specific marginalized groups. This reveals the unexpressed conditions under which data agonism might or might not be sufficient to support meaningful participation. The move towards online civic organizing on Facebook has resulted in intensification of strongly affective and even hateful statements (Banaji & Bhat, 2022). In addition, citizens are enmeshed with the broader affective narratives circulating in the media. Participants leveraged discourses of inequality and class-based division, including through the judicial review. With the judicial review unsuccessful, the narratives of inequality folded back on to themselves. Two things happened: one, an increasing affective polarization (see Harel et al., 2020); and two, a connection between this more polarized discussion and broader social discourses including those from political parties. In short, affective stories that create strong, shared and dismissive feelings can be leveraged in service of political distrust.

Harel et al. (2020) use the term 'affective polarization' to suggest how intractable conflict provokes the desire for physical and psychological separation. It is possible to see how aspects of this separation begins to emerge in the group discussions that describe every political action as an act against the Facebook group's imagined 'public'. This separation undermines the normative conditions for data agonism. It illustrates how datafied civic participation might contribute to affective polarization (see also Kubin and von Sikorski, 2021). This could occur by limiting constructive disagreement and dismissing the legitimacy of marginalized experience because consultation processes demand objective data. Affective polarization demonstrates how creating belonging among one group can create rejection of another (Iyengar et al., 2012; Mason, 2018). The LTN discussions did not begin with a focus on either a political opponent nor on a specific out-group. However, over time the group's discussions leveraged familiar narratives of inequality and unfairness into more polarizing statements. Some of these statements showed what Northrup (1989) identify as indicators of increased political polarization and that Harel et al. (2020) observe in a Facebook group known for propagating hate speech. These indicators include: distortion of the position of the other, denial of legitimacy, and attempts at dehumanization. The presence of these indicators suggests that this type of social media deliberation is not conducive to supporting agonistic data practices. In the three themes presented above, the Facebook group discourse includes othering of a range of (not always well-specified) groups as well as attempts to deny legitimacy to others, including the connections made between data analysis or survey sampling and dishonesty or manipulation. Dehumanizing language also appeared, comparing Sadiq Khan to an animal and referring to using racial slurs, as well the evocations of 'life and death' echoed in the conspiratorial language decrying 'Fifteen-Minute Cities'.

Legitimacy and ambivalence

Struggles over legitimacy as are key aspects of the broader context within which agonistic data politics are placed. The two orders of legitimacy I observed show therisks that come from displacement of strong feeling into insular media spaces. Specifically, second-order claims on legitimacy hinge upon a sense of local belonging and mutual reinforcement – including mutual reinforcement of racism, conspiracy theories and denial of legitimacy to 'others.' The datafication of public discussion and democratic process is thus problematic not only because of the double bind, wherein some groups must make extra efforts to position their experiences in the objective manner that dataism values, but because the prospects for agonism are unsupported within data-driven consultation.

Lindsay Poirier identifies that the datafication of public participation creates 'data (-)based ambivalences' – the way 'conflicting dispositions . . . are mediated through everyday experiences with data infrastructure' (Poirier, 2021, p. 971). Poirer identifies how 'data(-)based ambivalence troubles the power imbalances that privilege quantitative ways of knowing over other ways of knowing, prompting communities to reposition data(-)based representations as rhetorical tools instead of objective or unbiased ones.' In response to this paper's research questions, the ideology of 'dataism' establishes objective and standardized data as valuable. In the LTN case, the data-based ambivalences are connected to and reflected through conflicts of legitimacy, where the Facebook group employs the rhetorical power of data to contest the claims made by the local government that most residents supported LTNs. The group participants sought to express their feelings and concerns through a critique of data, as well as to position their experiences as if they were data. Meanwhile, the underlying feelings of alienation and inequality transmuted into personal attack, racism and conspiracy theories. Being both 'in' the data and 'against' dataism reveals the difficulty of achieving the conditions necessary for agonistic data practice. This suggests that smart governance processes as explored here need to be reconsidered in order to sustain agonistic practices. Without space for ambivalence, efforts at data agonism might contribute to antagonism and affective polarization.

Conclusion

Agonism involves tussling with difference without allowing it to define one's position. The prospect of agonism, in the sense that Crooks and Currie hope will present opportunities for marginalized communities to challenge the processes of datafication, is not returned in the case of the LTN planning process. This is perhaps due to the way that this process draws on a smart governance framework combining a valorization of data (or 'dataism') with an expectation to streamline lived experience into objective or standardized knowledge. The gaps between the 'first-order' legitimacy associated with presence in official data and the 'second-order' legitimacy of marginalized identity expressed through affective means demonstrate the challenges to agonistic data practice, especially the insularity that results from focusing on the legitimacy of affective, marginalized knowledge. Participants in the LTN Facebook group were aware of their insularity, and at times intensified their self-referential strategies to intensify a separation between their discussion and the broader policy process. This removed their critiques of data and

their feelings about LTNs from the official consultation process and shared them privately and through protest action, limiting the extent to which these strongly held differences could be more broadly viewed as legitimate.

Accepting the inevitability of and experimenting, over time, with strategies that allow citizen positions to shape policy might all increase the capacity for agonism. The aim of introducing LTNs is to change behaviour and eventually to reduce vehicle ownership and use in order to achieve broad, long-term social goals including reducing air pollution and addressing climate change. As such, short-term or relatively localized opposition may appear unavoidable. However, the differential impacts on individuals associated with achieving these aims were not effectively acknowledged in many of the consultation processes, leading to consolidated and more visible opposition: a London neighbourhood nearby to the area studied in this paper is due to remove LTNs as a result of public pressure (Quadri, 2023). Such dissent should not be 'managed out' and instead downsides to projects like LTNs should be honestly presented (Bosetti et al., 2023). Similarly, changing the approach to consultation to address 'less-heard' groups and mitigate the significance of 'gatekeepers' such as self-appointed community representatives might address the outsize role that these actors may have (Goodman et al., 2023). Beyond this, a capacity to manage dissent productively is essential to mitigate against polarization.

Affective polarization and amplification of conspiracy theories pose risks to democracy and to the overall legitimacy of media environments. Processes such as the citizen juries used in similar areas of London to address issues of climate change can make space for dissent and difference (Southwark Citizen's Jury, 2022). Participation in processes structured to ignore or dismiss opposition may feel vacuous, while retrenchment into insular online spaces may intensify self-conscious strategies of employing affect, aligning to antagonistic perspectives and therefore failing to return the prospect of agonism.

Structured processes that foreground the potential for dissent and disruptive narratives could perhaps provide ways to counteract these tendencies. In order for this to occur though, democratic practice must become better at tolerating dissent, disagreement and outrage.

Notes

1. Ethics approval for this study was granted by the author's institution, with approval number *106681*
2. 'Rat running' is a British slang term for the practice of driving quickly through side roads or residential streets in order to avoid traffic on main roads.

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Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

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