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A NECESSARY DISENCHANTMENT: MYTH, AGENCY AND INJUSTICE IN A DIGITAL WORLD

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KEYWORDS

Media institutions; social knowledge; myth; hermeneutics; social media platforms; big data

Abstract

This article reviews the history of how the status and authority of media institutions over the past century have been entangled with wider claims about social knowledge and the order of societies. It analyses those relations in terms of three successive and now overlapping myths: ‘the myth of the mediated centre’ which claims that media (traditional mass media institutions) are privileged access points to our centre of social values and social reality; the ‘myth of us’ which is now emerging around the supposedly natural collectivities that ‘we’ form on commercial social media platforms; and, from outside the media industries, the ‘myth of Big Data’ which proclaims big data techniques are generating an entirely new and better form of social knowledge. All these myths require deconstruction by a particular hermeneutic, but the case of the myth of Big Data is the most paradoxical, since its claims amount to an anti-hermeneutic, a refusal to interpret the social anymore as the resultant of processes of meaning-making. This third myth, it is argued, requires a hermeneutic of the anti-hermeneutic if it is to be deconstructed and previous conceptions of social knowledge (from Weber onwards), and the claims to possible justice and politics based upon them, are to be preserved.

Introduction

I’m delighted to be back at LSE, and particularly its Department of Media and Communications, after seven years away. In marking my return, I want to give you some idea of how I’ve been thinking and researching about media and communications over the past 20 years and of the themes that currently preoccupy me. I am interested in how certain institutions with concentrated power over the production and circulation of symbols (we’ve usually called them ‘media’) have for at least two centuries been bound up with our possibilities of knowing the social. By the term ‘social’, I mean the web of interrelationships and dependencies between human beings which are always, in part, relations of meaning.¹

Media are institutions with particular power over the means for *representing* shared reality, reality that becomes recognised as ‘ours’, in part, through what media do. To grasp how this power works, we need to follow the larger stories about ‘society’ and the ‘social world’ that get told through and about our everyday uses of media. That means making media’s familiarity strange, and taking, as feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith (1987) put it, ‘the everyday world as problematic’. In that spirit, I will use the language of anthropology to describe three ‘myths’ by which the relations between media and social knowledge have been framed and disguised. Myths that have emerged at different times but now overlap each other. I will call them ‘the myth of the mediated centre’, ‘the myth of “us”’ and ‘the myth of big data’ (that is, of big data as social knowledge). The institutions we usually call ‘media’ (television and radio companies, newspaper corporations) were central to the first myth, but are increasingly displaced in the production of the second and third, as centralized information and image flows (‘media’) becomes entangled with the building and sustaining of platforms for social interaction (such as Facebook, Twitter, Weibo) and with the continuous gathering of data about us whose value fuels those platforms and increasingly the whole of the media and cultural industries.

Calling these different processes ‘myths’ enables us to see an underlying pattern in how, as societies, we make sense of organizing things around *assumptions* that certain types of information, expertise and knowledge are more valuable than others, and offer us a privileged view on the reality of social life. I say ‘we’ because these myths are not merely an elite production: we are all, potentially, involved in producing these myths through our everyday actions (making ‘myth’ a more useful term, incidentally, than ‘ideology’). Each myth I have mentioned has a distinctive domain, a distinctive effect and a distinctive set of beneficiaries.

To anticipate my story, *the myth of the mediated centre* has as its domain the organization of everyday life and resources around the productions of large media institutions. Its effect is to make sense of inclusive media-based social collectivities: historically, these have been focussed on national (sometimes regional) broadcasting territories. This myth has various beneficiaries: proximately, media institutions themselves; ultimately government (which needs large media to provide the means for assuming that it can still talk to its population) and advertisers, or least those advertisers still interested in buying access to whole populations or segments of them. The ‘*myth of us*’ has, as its domain, our activities of social interaction as registered by social media platforms; its effect is to underwrite the belief on which those platforms rely that *this* is where we now come together: the ‘us’ here is not necessarily national, it is just as easily transnational. This myth’s immediate beneficiaries are the platform owners, while the ultimate benefit passes to the institutions from government to marketers that want to remain in touch with us this way. The *myth of big data* is the strangest of the three myths I’ll discuss tonight, because it seems to have nothing to do with media institutions, and its operations are indeterminate in scale. Its domain is simply: everything – the entire extent of the data we generate as we live and interact. Its effect is to reinforce our belief that such data offer a new route to *social* knowledge as well. Its proximate beneficiaries are the new data mining and data analysis industry; its ultimate beneficiaries are businesses which want continuous marketing access to whatever we do, and states which are rethinking government as a version of total data access.

Each such myth, by rationalizing a certain perspective on how we come to know the social, obscures our possibilities for imagining, describing and enacting the social *otherwise*. And each myth, to be unpacked, requires its own distinctive type of interpretation or hermeneutic. Which is where the special power of the myth of Big Data emerges, because it challenges the very idea that the social is something we can *interpret* at all. I’ll return to this anti-hermeneutic danger later, but for now I’ll recall a great philosopher, the late Bernard Williams, who articulated that danger poignantly in one of his last public lectures: ‘we run’, he said, ‘the risk that the whole humanities enterprise of trying to understand ourselves is coming to seem peculiar’. And yet, he wrote, ‘we all have an interest in the life of that study – not just a shared interest but an interest in [its being] a shared interest’ (2006: 198-99). Indeed that interest is integral to any notion of *social* understanding.

The myth of the mediated centre

But I am getting ahead of myself. Let me go back to the beginning of my story. What exactly do I mean by ‘media’? ‘Media’ are, first of all, technological means for producing, circulating and receiving *communications*. We would have no media unless human life were constituted, in a crucial respect, by communications: by the exchanges of signs that enable acts of communications to *make* sense, to accumulate over time *as* meaning, *as* knowledge. As Paul Ricoeur put it, ‘substituting signs for things . . . [is] more than a mere effect in social life. It is its very foundation’ (1980: 219).

It became essential however at a certain point in history to mark off the work of ‘media’ infrastructures from the general flow of communications. This occurred when technological forms of communications emerged that could consistently and reliably transmit certain bundles of meaning across large territories. Many would associate this with the start of large-scale printing in the 15th and 16th centuries in Europe.

The notion of ‘*the media*’, in which I’ve been strongly interested in my work, emerged in the early 20th century (according to the OED) with the interconnected growth of the modern state, modern economy and modern media institutions: stable infrastructures and networks for the production and circulation of communication packages to a state’s whole population. The social theorist who paid most attention to these shifts was Gabriel Tarde (1969). Through newspapers, radio, film and television’s intensified forms of simultaneity, media gathered populations, or seemed to, in rituals of national attention that took initially quite curious forms such as in the UK the media event of the Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race: I still remember my mother wearing an Oxford blue ribbon on the race day (she had never been to university). Such rituals evolved into more stable genres such as the coronation (1953 in Britain, 1958 in Japan), the state funeral (1963 in the USA, 1965 in Britain), the sporting spectacle, and so on.

Media institutions’ relations to social knowledge have been entangled from the start with the submerged categories, norms and exclusions through which *some* notion of national life or culture gets constituted. Understanding these relations means going beyond the analysis of particular media contents and production processes, and considering media institutions’ role in the stories we tell about ourselves, as members of a social domain, or indeed of a democratic one. Raymond Williams captured this in his 1974 inaugural Lecture at Cambridge when he wrote of the role of TV drama in providing ‘images, representations, of what living is now like’ (1975: 9) in societies that were becoming increasingly ‘opaque’. But it was a Latin American scholar, Jesus Martín-Barbero, who summed up most neatly the shift that a content-based media research must undergo to fulfil Williams’ core insight. He wrote a book called ‘From the Media to the Mediations’ (oddly the English edition relegated the Spanish main title to subtitle: Martín-Barbero 1993). And in Britain Roger Silverstone, founder of LSE’s Dept of Media and Communications, against the prevailing fashions in media research, argued for a wider view of the social and cultural processes that media constitute, which he called ‘mediation’.

I have tried to maintain this tradition of thinking about media institutions’ consequences for social knowledge through the term ‘myth’ which I introduced a few minutes ago. I use the term the ‘myth of the mediated centre’ (Couldry 2003; 2012) to point to the long history whereby media institutions became increasingly implicated in the languages, practices and organizational logics of whole societies. This myth is what we might call a ‘reserve rationalization’ that makes sense of our organizing our lives around the content flows of media organizations; it tells us that society *has* a ‘centre’ of value, knowledge and meaning, and that particular institutions, those we call ‘media’, have a privileged role in giving us access to that supposed ‘centre’. Media institutions work hard to sustain that myth, telling us we are all watching, that this programme or event shows ‘what’s going on’ for us as a society. So too do other institutions, such as governments and political parties, which depend on something like a mediated centre to underwrite their ‘space of appearances’. This is how media institutions’ symbolic power gets reproduced. Media have evolved elaborate categories of thought to express the myth of their centrality: for example, the language of ‘liveness’ and celebrity, the greater value given to what’s “in” the media over what isn’t. But, as I have argued for a decade or so, we need to disenchant that language, not because it

is necessarily bad for us, but in order to grasp all the work done that keeps it in place, and sustains the particular perspective on social knowledge that it involves.²

Paradoxically, my analysis has become less controversial as, with digital media, the plausibility of the myth of the mediated centre has in some ways declined! In the past 10 years, it has become ever more obvious *when* media are telling us they are central to our lives and to society's life, *and why* - because for some sectors such as the press, audiences have declined irreversibly, while traditional media must compete for our attention with so many other communication interfaces. But the myth of the mediated centre still provides a useful reference-point to interpret the next media format that claims to offer a privileged standpoint on our shared 'reality'. We still need that 'hermeneutic of suspicion'.

However such a hermeneutic is no longer enough to grasp what media are doing, and what we are now doing with media. It is not that 'media' have disappeared, or that media's claims to be central have diminished – arguably those claims have become more insistent.³ It is rather that the whole terrain of media (and media institutions) has been reshaped by huge external forces. Fundamental has been what Rainie and Wellman (2012: ix) call the 'triple revolution' of 1) the internet as a personalized mode of one-to-one and many-to-many communication, 2) the continuous availability of both interpersonal and mass communication while on the move, and 3) the resulting intensification of social networking. A key tool for such networking has been 'social media platforms', such as Facebook. Social media are of fundamental importance to the myth of the mediated centre, because they offer a new form of centrality, a new *social* 'liveness', mediated apparently *by us* rather than by content-producing media institutions. The implications for media as social institutions are profound. When we think about media today, we cannot sharply separate, as we once did, media infrastructure (for the centralized distribution of institutional content) from communications infrastructure (for distributed, interpersonal forms of communication). Both now flow into and over each other and across the same platforms.

But there is no question of social media simply substituting *for* mass media institutions. Large-scale media content producers, and cultural industries linked to them such as advertising, are already closely involved *in* social media. Indeed, social media platforms, far from being an authentic social response to large media, represent an entirely new business model for media and communications infrastructures. And, as this new way of organizing business and our lives around digital platforms becomes normalized, a new myth is emerging to make sense of this.

The Myth of 'us'

A new myth about the collectivities we form when we use platforms such as Facebook. An emerging myth of *natural* collectivity that is particularly seductive, because here traditional media institutions seem to drop out altogether from the picture: the story is focussed entirely on what 'we' do naturally, when we have the chance to keep in touch with each other, as of course we want to do. Charlotte Brunsdon and David Morley (1978) had a brilliant phrase for the myth of the mediated centre at its mass media peak in the late 1970s: the 'nation now'. Today, when Facebook offers to 'tell the story of our lives', we have: 'us now'. Of course, this myth is not yet fully established: if the myth of the mediated centre took decades to become so, the myth of 'us' too will only fully stabilise over time. Nor am I the first to detect a mystification here: Christian Fuchs (2011) and Jose Van Dijck (2013) have brought out the *competing* norms at work in the proprietary business models of social media. We see the myth's effects in accounts of political protests across the world in the past 3 years as Twitter or Facebook revolutions, or in the *Guardian's* recent listing (1 September 2013, *Media* section) of 'us' as media personality of 2013.

But again, why talk of ‘myth’, why disenchant what so often is good fun? Because we must be wary when our most important moments of ‘coming together’ *seem* to be captured in what people happen to do on platforms whose economic value is based on generating *just such* an idea of natural collectivity. It would not be enough for Facebook, for example, to say that lots of small groups, unknown to each other, do roughly similar things behind virtual closed doors. It is vital to the value claims on which Facebook depends for it to open as many of those interconnecting doors as possible and claim that Facebook is what ‘we’ are now doing together. ‘We’, the collectivity of everyday people, everywhere. Vague as it is, this claim grounds any number of specific rhetorics and judgements about what’s happening, what’s trending, and so (by a self-accumulating logic) what *matters*: for government, society, business, and for us.

The myth of ‘us’, however, because it is loosely focussed across vast platforms (in Facebook’s case of 1.1 billion users in over 200 countries), requires a special type of analysis. Foucault in his book *The Archaeology of Knowledge* used the term ‘system of dispersion’ for patterns of communication, documentation, and action that are rule-like across many different sites. He talks of ‘practices that systematically *form* the objects of which they speak’ (1972: 49). Remember there is no collectivity, no ‘us’, of the sort we have come to talk about around social media, until those platforms attract ‘us’ (whoever we are) to use them, and link to them. The myth of ‘us’ is even less of a belief system than the myth of the mediated centre; it is more a basic form of orientation, what Andre Jansson (2013: 289) calls the ‘centripetal dynamic’ of always ‘checking in’, so routine that it requires not a hermeneutic of suspicion (there is often little to deconstruct) but a hermeneutic of tracking, tracking us as we perform the act of ‘being us’, on platforms that propose we do just that.

But the myth of ‘us’ is spawning academic discourses that do need some deconstruction, some suspicion. Take Rainie and Wellman’s book *Networked* that I mentioned earlier, where they claim that we are witnessing the rise of ‘a different social order . . . [a] networked [social] *operating system* [that] gives people new ways to solve problems and meet social needs’ (2012: 8-9, added emphasis). ‘The new media’ they write ‘*is* the new neighbourhood’ (2012: 13). There are two problems with such language. First, rhetoric about the social does the work of analysis: what do these writers mean by ‘social’? does it relate to what we have meant by that word in the past? Second, such writing is silent about the other, possibly also social (or even anti-social), features of the territory *across which* this ‘us’ is gathered. The myth of ‘us’, like all myth, disguises the other knowledges it helps us lose along the way. So we need to dis-enchant such rhetorical claims about the new social world that platform-based networks make possible.

One route to doing so is to think about the economics of such platforms. Social platforms benefit a very different type of advertiser from mass broadcasting. An advertiser who is concerned with reaching not big audiences gathering simultaneously at a particular place, but individuals tracked serially as they cross the media landscape, including on social media. We all know that the tracking of our activity on social media sites *is* the basis of the value Facebook sells to advertisers and, indirectly, to the new data-mining industry that has emerged to create additional value out of that data. As Joseph Turow explains in his book *The Daily You* (Turow 2011), traditional media (to survive) must deal with this new industry, often offering their own data-gathering capacities to tempt potential advertisers. The ‘social’ at which media processes are targeted is being reconstructed all around us. In a video roadshow just before Facebook flotation’s last year, Mark Zuckerberg claimed Facebook is ‘a fabric that can make *any* experience online social’ (quoted Van Dijck 2013: 67), sounding more like a social theorist than many social theorists so-called.

The Myth of Big Data

The value in this newly constructed social domain is unimaginable without a third myth, the myth of big data. Of course Big Data – the huge capacities of computer-based analysis now increasingly influencing science, corporate and governmental agendas - is not *itself* mythical. Massive computing capacity really is vital to discovering complex patterns in huge datasets, for example in the medical field; the servers that manage the flow of our everyday communications really do involve huge costs (on one estimate nearly \$150 billion a year: Gartner quoted in Arthur (2013)); and there really is a practical problem of interpreting all the data now circulating (a recent Japanese film launch generated 150,000 tweets per second (Arthur 2013), so if you took 6-7 seconds to read and respond to any one, another million would *already* be there by the time you had finished!). But I'm interested here (as with the first two myths I discussed) in the claims now being made about what big data can achieve for understanding our world.

Those claims matter, in part, because big data capacity is increasingly integrated into advertising and marketing in the form of the means to track vast numbers of individuals (data company Acxiom claims to track more than 700 million consumers globally): so big data affects the wider field where market-based media compete for funding. More broadly, 'big data' advocates' claims about what *counts as* social knowledge affect all of us interested in producing social knowledge: whether in the media or in academic disciplines that research the social, as Mike Savage and Roger Burrows (2007) warned a few years back in an article called 'The Coming Crisis of Empirical Sociology'. Big data's new 'politics of measurement' (in anthropologist James Scott's phrase: 1998: 29) is changing the terrain on which all large institutions (including governments) can *claim* to tell us the way things are.

I am not the first to talk of 'myth' in relation to big data. Tom Deutsch (2013), a commentator on IBMDataMag.com, wrote recently of the 'vendor myths' about the qualities or problems with particular types of big datasets. More deeply, Kate Crawford at MIT's Center for Civic Media who with danah boyd has done so much to draw academic attention to the issues around big data (boyd and Crawford 2012), has spoken of the myths about the neutrality of big datasets and our chances of avoiding being identified by big data gatherers. As she noted, 'big data is something we create, but it's also something we imagine' (quoted in Hardy 2013). Absolutely, and I'm concerned here with an even more wide-ranging act of imagination that connects big data practices to our very possibilities for social knowledge.

Listen to Victor Mayer-Schonberger and Kenneth Cukier in their recent book *Big Data: A Revolution that will Transform the Way We Live, Work and Think* (2013). They celebrate the fact that, in response to the almost impossible challenge of making sense of the vast masses of data we can now collect, analysts are giving up on specific hypotheses and instead focussing on generating, through countless parallel calculations, 'a really good proxy' for whatever is associated with a phenomenon, and then relying on *that* as the predictor. Sometimes the proxy makes indirect interpretative sense: as in the controversial case where US retailer Target started communicating with a young woman on the basis she was pregnant, just because she had started buying a basket of consumer products that *their* predictive model associated with women who would shortly *start* buying pregnancy products. Sometimes however the proxy makes no interpretative sense at all, and indeed this is the authors' point. This lack of sense doesn't matter, they argue, because a really good proxy, once discovered, will help us *see* regularity across vast numbers of variables that would otherwise be invisible. The result is to undercut the rationale of not just qualitative methods of analysis, but also of the interpretative models – the hermeneutics, if you like - that for decades have driven large-scale survey research. And, if we reject the very possibility of such

a hermeneutic, then we appear to disarm hermeneutic *critique* also, making the myth of Big Data armour-plated against criticism.

So let's follow this third myth in more detail. Myth works, as I've often argued following Maurice Bloch (1989) and Roland Barthes (1972), through ambiguity: through sometimes claiming to offer 'truth' and at other times to be merely playful, providing what, in the George W. Bush era, was called 'plausible deniability', but here at the level of claims *about* knowledge claims! So Mayer-Schonberger and Cukier, on the one hand, say big data bring 'an essential enrichment in human comprehension' (2013: 96). They go further, proposing a large project of 'datafication' that involves quantifying every aspect of everyday phenomena to enable big data analysts to find its hidden order: the result will be 'a great infrastructure project' like Diderot's 18th century encyclopedia: 'this enormous treasure chest of *datafied* information . . . once analysed, will shed light on social dynamics at all levels, from the individual to society at large' (2013: 93-94, emphasis added). The world too will look different: 'we will no longer regard our world as a string of happenings that we explain as a natural *or social* phenomenon, but as a universe comprised *essentially* of information' (2013: 96, emphasis added). On the other hand, when the moral consequences of acting on the basis of 'big data' arises - for example, arresting people for offences they are *predicted* to commit but haven't yet - they back off and say that big data only provide probabilities, not actualities, and worry about 'fetishizing the output of our [data] analysis' (151).

Mayer-Schonberger and Cukier's is just one of many books making similarly mythical claims. A trailblazing article in 2007 by *Wired* magazine editor Chris Anderson called 'The End of Theory' (Anderson 2007) announced that access to 'big data' meant: 'out with every theory of human behaviour, from linguistics to sociology. Forget taxonomy, ontology and psychology'. Why? Because the proxies that big data generate are good enough; or as Google's research director put it, 'you can succeed without them'. But success for who? For what purpose? In the service of whose or what notion of knowledge?

Google's clearly, and that of many other data-processing institutions big and small, but the unintended side-effects for the rest of us may be less positive. Writing about how governments' understanding of, and decision-making, about its populations will increasingly rely on big data, Evelyn Ruppert suggests that we will all get used to being governed not on the basis of our individual features, but as 'data doubles' that 'will supplant older notions of the general population' (2011: 223): predictive strings that tell those who care what, say a man in his 50s with a certain educational background will do on a Thursday evening in November. And, as with all the myths I've discussed, we too are involved in its reproduction, supplying information (to government and countless other collectors, including social media platforms) about what we do, as we do it, allowing that information to supplant other possible types of information about ourselves, what we say, and how we reflect on our situation. Algorithmic practices are now, for example, at the core of states' modes of managing border security risk, as geographer Louise Amoore (2011) shows. In development is a quite distinctive *working model* of 'what human beings are' that validates new types of evidence and expertise - and supplants other knowledges of our present and our futures.

To disenchant this new myth, we need a new type of interpretation or hermeneutic: what paradoxically we might call 'a hermeneutic of the *anti-hermeneutic*'. Judith Butler provides a clue to this when in her book *Precarious Life*, discussing how a media of excessive spectacle (too much showing) narrows our grasp of the human, she writes that 'there is less a dehumanizing discourse at work here than a *refusal* of discourse' (2004: 36, added emphasis). It is the *gaps and breaks* in our languages of social interpretation, authorised by the myth of big data, on which we must focus. The CEO of a big-data-based sentiment analysis company, sounds reasonable when he says that 'if we're right 75% to 80%

of the time, we don't care about any single story' (quoted Andrejevic 2013: 56).⁴ But if the big data model works by equating our only forms of social knowledge with such *probabilities*, then we have already started organising things so that the single story – your story, my story - really doesn't matter. That raises fundamental questions about individual voice, and the way voice is valued in our societies (a link back to another theme in my earlier work: Couldry 2010).

The myth of big data is oriented to the social world differently from the other myths I have discussed. It does not have as its domain a national population, or even the particular collectivities that might gather online. It builds its population, data-bit by data-bit, through a series of operations that bypass earlier ideas of social interrelations. Its new form of 'social knowledge' *splits up discourse populations*: the groups that could once be talked about *as* populations for various purposes. It *fractures the space of discourse*, depicting its data subjects in ways that don't connect any more with the space of action and thought in which actual individuals think they live; and it *stretches the time of discourse*, aggregating action-fragments from any moment in the stream of a person's recorded acts into patterns that bear little relationship to how those people *themselves* understand the sequence and meaning of their actions.

Combine all this and mystify it through the myth of big data - and you risk replacing older ways of talking about the social world that can still be related to social actors with myriad data-strings that lack *any* elements that connect with how individuals, with recognisable sets of human aims and capabilities, make sense of what they do. And so, since hermeneutics (and the exchange of signs) is the basis of social life, in installing the Myth of Big Data into our working practices for generating and attributing knowledge, we risk unravelling the social itself, or at least the languages of social description on which not just sociology, but also justice and politics, have relied.⁵ We risk building a social landscape peopled by what the 19th century Russian novelist Nikolai Gogol (2004) called 'dead souls': human entities that have financial value (in his novel, if you remember, as mortgageable assets; in our new world, as unwitting data producers), but that are *not alive*, not at least in the sense we know human beings to be alive.

And yet this transformation may not seem 'peculiar' to us (in Bernard Williams' word), because we have become accustomed to giving accounts of ourselves in such data-saturated ways on social networking sites and elsewhere; as such habits become established, we may lose the sense that our collective life could lie anywhere else than in such 'datafied' forms. And this matters not just to those, like me, with a vested interest in certain ways of talking about the social. It matters to all citizens – to all those who would be citizens – that corporate interests and increasingly *the state too* aspires to know us through big data. As John Lanchester put it in a fine article in the Guardian in October (Lanchester 2013), the surveillance capacities of the American and British states operate increasingly on the principle that 'all they need is everything'.⁶ It would be a mistake to see the problem here as simply 'the big, bad state', and I am not concerned Prism and Tempora tonight. My point is that the myth of big data has *already* rationalized a state of affairs where a network of data-gathering and data-amalgamating institutions has, or aspires to have, everything (what Acxiom calls 'big marketing data': Phil Mui, Acxiom's chief technology officer, quoted Steel 2013). As governments and corporations increasingly prioritise access to 'big data' in their visions of how they will govern or profit (or both), we are only a step away from the fact, *not* the myth, of continuous surveillance from all directions as the new basis of how societies and the world are ordered.⁷

Beyond the Myth of Big Data

So what can we do about this? It is not enough to simply reject the myth of big data. Jaron Lanier, the inventor of virtual reality in the 1990s, insists that ‘people’ [not algorithms] are ‘the only sources or destinations of information’ (2013: 4). Absolutely, but, when a vast attempt is under way to build a different account of how and why people matter, it is not enough just to say *that* people matter. We need an alternative *account* of why knowledge about people matters for understanding the social, and indeed why ‘the social’ matters, if understood as more than just a probability set for predicting repeat action.

Media institutions, as sites from which important claims about the social still get made, can surely make a positive contribution here. Yes, we can easily imagine media producing ‘reality games’ that convert big data proxies into entertaining prediction (a Reality TV format originally from Colombia that was built around a lie detector machine already anticipated that), but media, at their best, present us with the force of this person’s account of what happened to them, of how their life has gone: exemplary bodies and voices. Conversely, we should not assume that academic critique is always helpful. There is no room for hermeneutics, for example, in the anti-humanist analysis of media technologies developed by Friedrich Kittler, concerned only with media’s role in the ‘channelling of signals’ (Parikka 2012: 69 on Kittler). Nor in social analysis based on ‘affect’ (such as Patricia Clough’s) which claims capitalism and data-based securitization have produced a world where ‘preconscious’ ‘pre-individual’ ‘affect modulation’ is all there is (Clough 2009: 50, 48). Such analysis, by abandoning any language for interpreting what human subjects *mean* by their action, condemns us, like sleepwalkers, to submit to such changes.⁸

Indeed I am troubled by the misalignment of ‘social imaginaries’ (Charles Taylor’s term: Taylor 2005) implied by today’s competing accounts of how we get to know our shared world. Some critical theory operates with a social imaginary that fits perfectly well with the imaginings of big data discourse (by renouncing any claim to interpret social meaning), but in the process loses touch with the imaginary that was for so long social science’s starting-point: Weber’s account of sociology as the ‘science which attempts the interpretative understanding of social action’ (1947: 88).⁹ As my colleague Robin Mansell (2012) argues in her book *Imagining the Internet*, we cannot move beyond such misalignments, unless we build new imaginaries - or at least, renew our hold on old ones. Challenging the myth of big data – a myth in which mass media and social media, the focus of my first two myths, are increasingly implicated and in which states and corporations are investing on a massive scale – this means reaffirming *in some version* the hermeneutic principles of that Weberian model of social science (otherwise social science risks being washed away with the ‘end of theory’).¹⁰ And it means reconnecting this hermeneutic principle with the genuine excitement today about what access to very large datasets, if differently thought about and interpreted, *might mean* for the future of social science and for citizens.

Conclusion: Agency and Injustice in the Digital Age

I want to end by discussing the implications of all this for two specific domains: agency and injustice. First, agency, by which I mean not brute acts (of clicking on this button, pressing ‘like’ to this post) but (following Weber) the longer processes of action based on reflection, giving an account of what one has done, even more basically, making sense of the world *so as* to act within it. It is easy to give up on agency in a world where so many of our acts are fed into predictive models that have no interest in meaning. And one response to the rise of big data is to argue that, regrettably, all agency has now been subsumed by ‘algorithmic power’ (Lash 2007). But this confuses big data discourse’s mythical vision of a ready-to-be-datatified universe for the messier world we live in. New forms of agency *are* emerging that do

not ignore the seeming inevitability today of being watched and counted, but address and deal with them.

The starting-points for a hermeneutics of the social world are, in key ways, being transformed by big data and by the embedding of algorithmic calculation in the everyday, and we need a new type of social research to address this. I call this research ‘social analytics’: that is, the study of how social actors are themselves using analytics - data measures of all kinds, including those they have developed or customised – to meet their own ends, for example, by interpreting the world and their actions in new ways. As Jannis Kallinikos (2009) points out, data only becomes information when it is interpreted, when it passes through hermeneutics. In a world that is starting to be shaped by the myth of big data, ‘social analytics’ tracks alternative projects of self-knowledge, group knowledge, institutional knowledge - whose ends are not the tracking of data for its own sake, or even for profit, but for broader social, civic, cultural or political goals. It also tracks people’s practices of resisting the introduction of analytics-based tools as default forms of management or evaluation. Conversely, it tracks those who are using analytics, even Big Data, to build new forms of civic and social action, for example to govern cities.

The idea of social analytics emerged from the Storycircle project that I led until this summer at Goldsmiths, particularly a project we did with a community reporter organization in the north of England.¹¹ It struck us that in the digital world being an organization with social ends - where ‘to be’ is already ‘to be measured’ - is challenging, a challenge of sociological interest to those of us still concerned with ‘meaningfully oriented behaviour’. For there - in how organizations gather data about their websites’ workings, how they think about metadata and its uses, and reflect on how, as organizations, they might change in response to such information – there, in raw form, are everyday battles to make sense of a data-saturated world in terms of social actors’ own goals, not data production alone.

So a world of algorithmic power may, if we pay attention, reveal new forms of interpretive agency, and not just for the massively powerful, but it also involves distinctive forms of *injustice*. All the myths I have discussed tonight rationalize massive concentrations of symbolic resource; all therefore involve injustice of a sort. Such injustices are difficult to name, precisely because they involve concentrations of power over the resources *for* naming. But the injustices associated with the myths I have discussed play out differently. The power asymmetries involved in ‘mediated centres’ are so embedded in the organization of modernity and its spaces for claiming justice that it is difficult now to see how we can operate without them; indeed, when genuine injustices occur through the operations of mass media (the UK phone-hacking scandals), they are difficult to resolve. But the injustices associated with the newer myths of us and of Big Data may have even more fundamental consequences for the longer term.

Take the digital infrastructure on which both social media and Big Data collection depend. As US legal scholar Julie Cohen notes, we all increasingly operate in our daily lives in ‘networked space’ but ‘the configuration of networked space is . . . increasingly opaque to its users’ (2012: 202). Indeed, she argues, today’s web of protocols and passwords, data requirements and data monitoring, has created ‘a system of governance that is authoritarian’, in the sense that there seems little alternative but to comply with it. And here, at the intersection between the desire to do just what we ordinarily do, and a new information sector’s need to track us across this ‘datafied’ space of appearances – here a vast power asymmetry is emerging that would not, I suspect, be tolerated if it were exclusively state power that was benefiting. But, as I noted earlier, we cannot easily prevent the state seeking to benefit from the big-data-gathering infrastructure.

Meanwhile the big data myth itself risks installing, as common sense, a way of thinking about human action that undermines the very languages through which we talk about justice and injustice. Why? Because the myth of Big Data's version of social knowledge lacks *any* interpretative language from which comparisons of how things stand for different individuals might be built. Here we return by another route to the fundamental link between communication, the social, and the institutions that acquire dominant power over our accounts of social knowledge. In Amartya Sen's recent reworking of the theory of justice, communication is the site where the lifeworld comparisons that ground claims for injustice get made. As Sen puts it at the end of *The Idea of Justice*, 'it is bad enough that the world in which we live has so much deprivation of one kind or another . . . it would be even more terrible if we were not able to communicate, respond, and altercate' (2009: 415). And yet through the myth of Big Data we are starting to give credence to a *working* model of social knowledge that operates as if the explanation of human action, and the processes of meaning-making on which such explanation has relied, don't matter any more. As Chris Anderson put it: 'who knows why people do what they do? The point is they do it'. While this earthy pragmatism has a certain charm, it turns its back on the hermeneutics that remains fundamental to our best understanding of social science. Big data rhetoric is the latest example of what philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer once called 'the alienation of the interpreter from the interpreted' (2004 [1975]: 312): I simply don't believe that Chris Anderson doesn't care why *he* does what he does.

It is always tempting however to think that the latest large claims for 'social' knowledge are absolutely new, and so must this time change humankind's possibilities for a good life, once and for all. The history of new media and communications technologies is littered with such predictions. Indeed we can find echoes in Big Data discourse of a problem that Friedrich Schiller captured 2 centuries ago in his comments on earlier languages of state-building: 'the State remains for ever a stranger to its citizens since at no point does it ever make contact with their feeling. Forced to resort to classification in order to cope with the variety of its citizens, and never to get an impression of humanity except through representation at second hand, the governing sector ends up by losing sight of them altogether, confusing their concrete reality with a mere construct of the intellect; while the governed cannot but receive with indifference laws which are scarcely, if at all, directed to them as persons' (1967 [o.p. 1795]: 37).

As Schiller saw, a polity based on an impoverished model of the human subject cannot expect much loyalty from, or legitimacy with, those it governs. The warning holds, whether it is governments or dense networks of corporations that are promoting the 'construct of the intellect' in question. The right response is not, of course, to walk away from the challenges and opportunities to which today's new forms of social interconnection and information generation give rise, but instead to make sure that, in facing those challenges and thinking creatively about those opportunities, we take care to hold on to our richer accounts of human agency and knowledge, and to the sense of possible democratic agency and possible justice whose basic components they supply. That is what, for me at least, is at stake in the work on our changing infrastructures of media, communications and information that I want to do here at LSE in the coming years.

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Data') have been added to make clear some points for which there was not time in the original version. Thanks to Sarah Green for an insightful comment on the version for publication which prompted note 5. I am deeply grateful to Louise Edwards, Andreas Hepp, Julian Henriques and Kate Nash for the very helpful comments they gave on drafts of the lecture.

Biographical Note

Nick Couldry's first degree was in Classics and Philosophy, the classical languages a product of his grammar school education, though philosophy has proved a more enduring interest. After an initial career as a lawyer and a period as a freelance musician and curator, Nick studied in the first cohort of the MA Contemporary Cultural Processes at Goldsmiths in 1993. A meeting with David Morley who supervised his MA dissertation on the social process generated by Rachel Whiteread's sculpture House (published in *New Formations* in 1995) led to his PhD (published as *The Place of Media Power:: Pilgrims and Witnesses of the Media Age* London: Routledge 2000) supervised by Morley. Other work written on the MA generated the arguments of *Inside Culture* (London: Sage 2000). After lecturing for two years at Goldsmiths (1998-2000), Nick joined the Department of Sociology at LSE in 2001 and was a founder member of LSE's new Department of Media and Communications in 2003, being promoted to Reader in Media, Communications and Culture in 2005. In 2006, Nick returned to Goldsmiths as Professor of Media and Communications where he worked until 2013, including from 2010-2013 as Deputy Head and then Head of the Department of Media and Communications (jointly with Natalie Fenton) and founding Director of the Centre for the study of Global Media and Democracy. In September 2013 he crossed the Thames once again to rejoin LSE as Professor of Media, Communications and Social Theory. He is the author or editor of eleven books including *Ethics of Media* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), *Media, Society, World* (Polity 2012) and *Why Voice Matters* (Sage 2010).

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¹ I draw implicitly throughout on William Sewell's (2005) approach to 'the social' which is both materialist and constructivist, that is, it takes seriously the effectiveness of materially-based processes of social construction. Within this perspective, 'the social' is not defined by reference to the unit of national society, nor to 'some "really real"' underlying all social relations, but rather to 'the various mediations that place people into "social" relations with one another' (2005: 326, 329). In the last sense only is the term 'social' needed, indeed it is indispensable. On this view, the 'complex interdependence of human interrelationships that we call the social' can only be understood through two *contrasting* metaphors, that of 'language game' and 'built environment' (2005: 365). This position is, I believe, quite compatible with the insights, for example, of Actor Network Theory and Bruno Latour's materially-based focus on 'the progressive composition of the common world' (2004: 244), in spite of Latour's own scepticism (2005) about the term 'social'.

² In talking of 'disenchantment', I am looking back to Weber's claim (Weber 1991: 155) that the modern age is one of inevitable disenchantment, a loss of divine reference-points. Maybe, but some new forms of disenchantment discussed here are now needed, and they will involve not loss, but gain.

³ Graeme Turner (2010) makes a similar argument.

⁴ The underlying source is Jeff Catlin, the CEO of Lexalytics Inc., quoted by Sisk (2009).

⁵ This unravelling, it is worth emphasising, dissipates not only any notion of the individual, but also any notion of the sense-making relationships *between* individuals (that is, is relational individuals) out of which the 'social' in Sewell's sense is made up. A 'social' ontology built merely by aggregating data detached from both individuals and the mutual relations through which they are, largely, formed is not a *social* ontology at all, but an elaborated and reified *refusal* of the social which, following Butler, requires a hermeneutic of its own anti-hermeneutic.

⁶ This phrase does not appear in the online edition of this article, but was a subheadline on page 36 of the London hard copy edition. Thanks to Tarleton Gillespie to alerting me to the need for this clarification.

⁷ Since I wrote this, I have read Dave Eggers' novel *The Circle* (2013) which gives this vision a nightmarish novelistic form.

⁸ See for a powerful critique of the misguided 'radicalism' of much writing on 'affect', Leys (2011).

⁹ It follows that what Paul Ricoeur, in a dialogue with neuroscientist Jean-Pierre Changeux called the 'semantic gap' between natural sciences (including neuroscience) and philosophical phenomenology (and any social science based upon it) should be defended, not collapsed, which is not to deny that renewed social science in interest in brain science is welcome (Ricoeur in Ricoeur and Changeux 2000: 28).

¹⁰ I say 'in some version' because the challenge of Actor Network Theory and Bruno Latour's profound rethinking of human relations to technology clearly requires *some* adjustment to Weber's hermeneutic principles (see also note 1).

¹¹ www.storycircle.co.uk. Researchers: Nick Couldry, Richard MacDonald, Wilma Clark, Luke Dickens, Aristeia Fotopoulou, Hilde Stephansen. Funded by the UK Digital Economy programme (EPSRC/AHRC, grant EP/H0003738/1).