



**DAT
ACT
IVE**



UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

SPUI25

ACADEMISCH-CULTUREEL PODIUM

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Executive Summary

Data for the Social Good, a two-day event organised by the interdisciplinary research project DATACTIVE, took place on November 16-17, 2017 at the Department of Media Studies, University of Amsterdam. The goal of the event was two-fold: to reflect upon how research data can be mobilized for the social good, and to lay the groundwork for a network of ‘activist-researchers’ and ‘researching-activists’ working on themes of mutual interest, within the framework of DATACTIVE’s research agenda on the politics of datafication.

Day 1 consisted in an evening presentation hosted at the cultural centre SPUI25, intended for a non-specialized audience, whereas Day 2 was an invitation-only workshop designed as a ‘focused encounter’ between activist-researchers’ and ‘researching-activists’. Invited speakers included **Charlotte Ryan** (University of Massachusetts, Lowell/Movement-Media Research Action Project), who discussed the ethics of ‘engaged research’, showcasing the promises and challenges of doing sociological research together with activists; **Lorenzo Pezzani** (Forensic Architecture, Goldsmiths), who introduced the participants to the research-activist use of forensic techniques applied to the documentation of the migration crisis in the Mediterranean sea; **Jeff Deutch** and **Niko Para** (Syrian Archive), who presented their efforts to build an open source archive of human rights violations in the Syrian conflict. **Fieke Jansen** served as moderator. Around 50 guests attended the public event on Day 1, which was also streamed online attracting over 1,000 viewers.

The morning of Day 2 featured extended, specialized presentations from the invited speakers, with the moderation of **Lonneke van der Velden** (DATACTIVE). The afternoon consisted in a collective brainstorm and targeted break-out group discussions, moderated **Kersti R. Wissenbach** (DATACTIVE). About 17 invited representatives of both academia and the organized civil society participated in the ‘focused encounter’.

‘Data for the Social Good’ was organized by the DATACTIVE team, and made possible by the generous funding of the European Research Council (ERC), the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA), and the Amsterdam Centre for Globalisations Studies (ACGS).



Invited speakers

Charlotte Ryan is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell, and the cofounder of the Movement/Media Research and Action Project (MRAP). She is the author of *Prime Time Activism: Media Strategies for Grassroots Organizing* (South End Press, 1999), and editor of *Rhyming Hope and History: Activists, Academics, and Social Movement Scholarship* (University of Minnesota Press, 2005). Ryan worked also as an organizer in labour, community, health and anti-intervention movements, and has extensive experience with collaborative work between academia and activism. She is a member of the DATACTIVE Ethics Board. To know more, visit <http://bit.ly/2CTz6GA>.

Lorenzo Pezzani is an architect and researcher. He is a lecturer at Goldsmiths, University of London, where he leads the MA Studio in Forensic Architecture. His work deals with the spatial politics and visual cultures of migration, with a particular focus on the geography of the ocean. Since 2011, he has been working on Forensic Oceanography, a collaborative project that critically investigates the militarized border regime in the Mediterranean Sea. He co-founded the WatchTheMed platform (<http://watchthemed.net>). Together with a wide network of NGOs, scientists, journalists, and activist groups, he has produced maps, videos and human right reports that attempt to document the ongoing deaths of migrants at sea.

Jeff Deutch & Niko Para are members of the Syrian Archive (<https://syrianarchive.org>), a Syrian-led collective of human rights activists dedicated to preserving open-source visual documentation relating to human rights violations committed by all sides during the Syrian conflict. Jeff Deutch is a fellow at the Centre for Internet and Human Rights, European University Viadrina (Germany), and a PhD candidate at the Humboldt-University in Berlin. He has developed workflows and methodologies for open-source investigations of human rights violations. Niko Para is lead technologist with the Syrian Archive, where he develops the Sugarcube sequential data investigation pipeline for secure collection, preservation, transformation of user-generated content. Previously, he worked with the Tactical Technology Collective and Global Witness.

Fieke Jansen is an independent researcher. Until 2017, she worked on the Politics of Data programme for Tactical Tech Collective. Before, she helped set up and manage the digital emergency programme for human rights defenders and activists at Hivos. She is co-author of the book *Digital AlterNatives* (Centre for Internet and Society / Hivos 2011).

The **DATACTIVE team** is composed by, in alphabetical order, Davide Beraldo, Jeroen de Vos, Becky Kazansky, Stefania Milan (PI), Niels ten Oever, Guillen Torres, Kersti R. Wissenbach, Lonneke van der Velden. See <https://data-activism.net/team/>.

List of participants

Richard van an Amersfoort (Buro Jansen & Jansen)
Davide Beraldo (DATACTIVE, University of Amsterdam)
Tashina Blom (Scholarly Hub/Tenders Exposed)
Anna Berti Suman (Tilburg Institute for Law, Technology, and Society)
Bernardo Caycedo (University of Amsterdam)
Julia Hoffmann (Hivos)
Shaz Jameson (Tilburg Institute for Law, Technology, and Society)
Becky Kazansky (DATACTIVE, University of Amsterdam)
Danny Lämmerhirt (Open Knowledge)
Stefania Milan (DATACTIVE, University of Amsterdam)
Alex Gekker (University of Amsterdam)
Miren Gutiérrez (University of Deusto)
Max Kortlander (Independent)
Shirley van der Maarel (Butterfly Works)
Jade Mandrake (ASCA, University of Amsterdam)
Wouter Moraal (Gr1p/Privacy Café)
Alain Otjens (Waag Society)
Peter Ruhof (Greenpeace)
Susana Sanz (Balkon Tactics)
Guillén Torres (DATACTIVE, University of Amsterdam)
Diliara Valeeva (University of Amsterdam – CORPNET)
Lonneke van der Velden (DATACTIVE, University of Amsterdam)
Kersti Wissenbach (DATACTIVE, University of Amsterdam)

Program

Day 1 – The public event: ‘Data for the Social Good’ (SPUI25)

20:00 – 20:10 Introduction by **Guillen Torres**

20:10 – 20:20 Presentation by **Charlotte Ryan**

20:20 – 20:30 Presentation by **Lorenzo Pezzani**

20:30 – 20:40 Presentation by **Jeff Deutch and Niko Para**

20:40 – 20:45 Opening of discussion by **Fieke Jansen**

20:45 – 21:10 Roundtable discussions

21:10 – 21:30 Questions from the audience

Day 2 – The workshop: A Focused Encounter between activist-researchers and researching-activists (Department of Media Studies)

09:15 - 09:30 Welcome by **Stefania Milan**

09:30 - 10:00 **Charlotte Ryan**: "Building sustained research collaborations"

10:00 - 10:30 **Lorenzo Pezzani**: "Forensic Oceanography: Documenting the violence of the EU's Maritime Frontier"

10:45 - 11:15 **Jeff Deutch** and **Niko Para**: "Archiving for accountability: Collaboratively preserving, verifying and investigating open-source documentation of rights abuses in Syria"

11:15 - 12:15 Discussion on 'data activist research', moderated by **Lonneke van der Velden**

13:30 -14:00 Collective brainstorm. Moderator: **Kersti Wissenbach**

14:00 - 16:00 Break- out sessions

15:30 - 16:00 Reporting back

16:00 Closing remarks by **Stefania Milan**

Day 1. The Public Event: Data for the Social Good @ SPUI25

Data for the Social Good consisted of an exploration into ‘data activist research’. The workshop was the first in a series of seminars planned by DATACTIVE as an attempt to bridge theory and praxis, as well as to establish a network of activist-researchers and researching-activists working on themes of mutual interest around the politics of datafication.

DATACTIVE explores the responses to datafication and massive data collection, as they are implemented by citizens and organized civil society. As part of this program, we have adopted an ‘engaged’ approach to research by virtue of which we produce scientifically sound knowledge, while simultaneously paying attention to the impact this process might have on people and communities (see Milan, 2010 and 2014; Milan and Milan, 2016; Milan and van der Velden 2016). Further, since we want to contribute to empowering activists and citizens to think critically about datafication and surveillance, we are currently exploring experimental research methods capable of bringing together activist communities and academia to develop joint research questions and/or projects. In this sense, the goal of the first of these ‘focused encounters’ was to start charting out a data-activist research agenda, beyond merely researching data activism, which takes into account our community building, mutual learning and knowledge-sharing ethos. On a more abstract level, the goal of the event was to discuss different aspects of inclusion and democracy, evidence and knowledge production, and the promises and perils of data activism research more in general.

This focused encounter featured four speakers and three projects who showcased ways of doing engaged research and the related challenges, followed by moderated discussions with the attendees. Whereas the public event on Day 1 catered to a general audience, Day 2 was intended as an in-depth conversation between academia and the community of practice emerging around various practices of data activism.

Charlotte Ryan (Media/Movement Research Action Project)

Ryan explored how to build sustained research collaborations between researchers and activists, reflecting on her extensive experience with the Movement Research Action Project (MRAP), founded in 1986 and operating out of Boston College, and providing training and technical assistance to community and grassroots organizations. Ryan addressed how to move from merely ‘researching about’, towards ‘researching *with*’ communities and organizations. To this end, she enumerated a series of specific challenges, one of the most prominent being that activism and academia work with different paces; whereas scholars have a specific agenda in mind and their time frames are attuned to the slow rhythms of scholarly publishing and grant-review processes, activists are typically more pragmatic and action-oriented. Moreover, activists often do not read academic texts, and academics often do not write having activists as their readership in mind. According to Ryan, this signals a

need of producing a common ground and creating trust bonds, which necessarily passes by the production of a shared sense of 'we'. Therefore, Ryan stressed the importance of understanding that constructing an 'us'—collective actor(s) with shared language, values, strategic priorities, and communication channels represents a considerable amount of 'work.' Under no circumstances can this work be assumed or taken for granted; when treated as purely aspirational, collective capacity is lacking. Without the work of building an us, collective actors are largely mythical, lacking capacity to sustain movement-building. Building collective actors, "the work of us," involves cycles of dialog and reflection around fundamental questions such as 'how do we define problems?', 'how do we address them?', 'what are our core values?'. Importantly, the task of building a common ground should actively address the issue of security, which has different meanings: from the physical and emotional safety of the group members or any vulnerable community which may experience the (negative) consequences of the group's actions, to group security, in the sense of guaranteeing the survival of the collective in the face of criticism, or the preservation of its communal memory.

Ryan listed a number of areas in which socially useful knowledge can (and has been) clearly derived from movement-researcher collaborations: debunking widespread social assumptions; identifying a social problem; tracing dynamics of inequality; organizing data to demand accountability; reviewing movement strategies and learning from failures. In her words, the 'big data revolution' can indeed be valuable in any of these areas, especially when documenting the scale of a social problem. But we need to keep in mind that big data is not a panacea: social actors have for a long time used numbers and statistics for political causes.

Ryan's presentation moved to reflect upon the preconditions for successful collaborations between researchers and activists, and to provide some recommendations based on the experience of MRAP. Ryan suggested that although there is a considerable amount of academic material that could be transferred to activists, it is crucial to first and foremost *listen to* them. This does not only require an effort in building dialogue and promoting reflection, but also in the creation of archives of social movements' activities, that is, encouraging movements to create their own history. This would both inspire self-reflection and allow doing 'research for the social good' in the future, on the basis of the collective memory being generated. Ryan also urged the attendees to keep in mind that research for the social good still needs to be 'good research', which means we should not deviate from evidence-based and methodologically-sound practices. Nevertheless, such requirements should not obscure the fact that research is a social process, which demands a careful consideration of 'for whom' and 'to what end' research is conducted. Ryan suggested that research should be organized in cycles. An initial cycle should deal with the 'hard questions' raised by organisations. Then, it is necessary to allocate a small amount of time to sort out a first-draft research plan, which needs to be discussed with the activists. In a second cycle,

it is often necessary to prioritize tasks, define the desired results, and clarify the division of labour. A general research plan or a specific memo of understanding needs to be developed.

Besides the operational steps, there are some more general preconditions that MRAP has developed. For example, identifying shared core values and world views; documenting internal patterns and being sensitive to issues of power dynamics; building a system of collaboration instead of relying on individuals, and fitting individual contributions in a collective frame. Ryan emphasized that what proved critical in the MRAP's experience was the role of learning communities in building shared conceptual frameworks and a repertoire of methods for documenting and analysing movement practices, to ensure that the research process remained faithful to a shared understanding of 'what things mean'. In sum, collaborative working relationships between civil society actors and researchers are both process and product in conducting "Research for the Social Good."

Lorenzo Pezzani (Forensic Architecture)

Pezzani presented Forensic Oceanography, one of the projects of Forensic Architecture, a research collective based at the Goldsmith College (<http://www.forensic-architecture.org>), where researchers, activists, makers and artists come together to address social and political issues building on a critical re-interpretation of the tools of forensic investigation. Pezzani opened his intervention stating that we are witnessing a shift in the field of human rights, from an era of (human) witnesses-based investigation, to an era where material objects are interrogated through the data they produce. In that context, whereas forensics has mostly been a practice of states and police forces, Forensic Architecture tries to turn it into a counter-hegemonic exercise.

In light of the many tragedies related to migration around the world, Forensic Oceanography interrogates the Mediterranean Sea as a digital archive, exploiting the extensive monitoring apparatus set up by states, by reclaiming the right of non-governmental actors to access these data. For example, the project makes use of technologies such as Automatic Identification Systems (AIS, a vessel-tracking system required by the International Maritime Organization), which provides real-time data on the movement of ships. While initially developed as a collision-avoidance device, it later turned into a tool for authorities to track maritime traffic, and, as shown by Pezzani's work, it can also be repurposed for activist-oriented investigation.

The 'Left to Die Boat' project (<http://www.forensic-architecture.org/case/left-die-boat/>) is paradigmatic of this type of data-activist research. The project tells the story of a boat that left Libya in the midst of the NATO-led military intervention in the country with 72 migrants on-board. The boat ran out of fuel and drifted back to Libyan coasts for 14 days, leading to the death of most of the passengers. The survivors stated that they had several contacts

with ships and helicopters while drifting, but no one intervened to provide assistance. In order to empower voices that could easily remain unheard and untrusted, the researchers involved in the project reconstructed and visualized the contacts made by the boat, proving that a number of ships (including military vessels) were navigating really close to the drifting boat but chose not to intervene.

In this sense, although the many sensing devices deployed in the sea are exploited by border control authorities to police migration and, more recently, also by far-right groups to interfere and delegitimize the work of NGOs assisting migrants, Forensic Oceanography shows that it is possible to revert this use by deploying *a disobedient gaze*, turning the sight of these policing technologies back to the act of policing itself. The discourse of EU agencies and politicians has tried to link the increased activity of NGOs to the higher number of illegal crossings, interpreting it as a proof that NGOs are a pull factor for dangerous journeys. However, by gathering and processing data from public sources, Forensic Architecture proved that the activity of NGOs vessels significantly reduces migrant's mortality rate. In this sense, Pezzani explained how although statistics can be used as a strategic tool to generate advocacy campaigns, it is important to keep in mind that numbers alone are not enough, but that *building a narrative around data* is fundamental.

Following the resonance obtained by the 'Left to Die Boat' project, Pezzani and his colleagues set up a platform, called WatchTheMed (<http://watchthemed.net>), allowing people to submit similar reports. While this experiment initially did not work out so well, mainly because it lacked the crowd that crowd-sourced projects need to function properly, the platform was subsequently seized by the Alarm Phone project, a real-time emergency line that allows non-state actors to be in touch with and support migrants in distress at sea. Perhaps if states and maritime authorities know there is someone else watching, claimed Pezzani, they might feel pressure to act.

Approaching the end of his presentation, Pezzani suggested that it may be useful for the purposes of data-activist research to *go beyond the classic idea of objectivity*, adopting instead an attitude that he characterized as 'critical proximity'. In his view, whereas objectivity traditionally conceived requires distance, it is also possible to remain close to the issue we study, which opens different possibilities for research. To close his intervention, Pezzani referred specifically to the role of data, stating that despite their centrality for the projects he has been involved with, it is important to always keep a critical attitude towards their role. Data provide clues, but we have to make sense of them; more data do not necessarily mean a more transparent and just world, and more importantly, data do not hold any truth in themselves. Truth is rather something we have to build and rebuild consistently and perennially. In this sense, Pezzani reminded us that we should always keep

in mind the necessarily contested nature of data, which is the very same condition by which they shape our worlds.

Jeff Deutch and Niko Para (The Syrian Archive)

Para and Deutch's talk focused on the Syrian Archive (<https://syrianarchive.org/>), an open-source intelligence effort to document and preserve information about human rights violations committed by all sides of the Syrian conflict. The Syrian conflict is probably a unique critical scenario in which, for the first time in history, a huge amount of user-generated content is constantly uploaded to social media. There are more hours of video uploaded online than hours of conflict itself. A lot of this content, however, has been deleted or censored: cyber-attacks from various actors started targeting social media accounts with the aim to silence them, and at the same time, the policy of censoring violence enforced by many platforms is based on poorly context-aware software, thus contributing to shut down valuable testimonies. This is the reason why the project focuses chiefly on *preservation*, which means to secure data on other servers, but also to verify it and categorise it. As Para and Deutch mentioned, the project aims at being transparent regarding tools, methodology and findings. On the other hand, everything is open source and most of the code used is available on the software repository GitHub. The developers also follow a user-centred approach, maintaining regular contact with the sources, who have provided so far more than 1 million entries to the archive, all of which undergo verification and categorisation.

Deutch and Para emphasized that a project of this kind necessarily raises many ethical dilemmas, for example how to acquire the consent of those depicted on the footage or pictures, or how to decide what should be preserved or not. Thus, the project follows a '*do no harm*' guideline along other more specific principles: 1) identify trustworthy sources of data collection and organize them in a database; 2) establish the trustworthiness of database content; 3) automate data collection and preservation. Furthermore, subsets of data are frequently exported for verification, and then imported back into the database, incorporating any relevant updates. One of the main mechanisms of verification for the media gathered by the Syrian Archive is cross-referencing. During the seize of the city of Aleppo, for example, videos of an alleged attack against a gas station emerged. By comparing architectural features and using external sources such as Google Maps, it was possible to establish the authenticity of the account. Other cases have involved the use of large-scale pattern analysis, such as using the availability of geo-located visual data in order to trace patterns of use of specific ammunition.

Deutch and Para concluded by pointing out that the main goal of the Syrian Archive is to build a trustworthy and stable database which is also easy to reuse by others, to enable evidence-based investigation. They also delved in the challenges faced by the project, for example the fact that the project is enabled by a small team, while the database built so far

is massive. Consequently, the Syrian Archive needs researchers to exploit the great potential that the archive has to make independent, reliable and large-scale investigation.

The roundtable

The presentations by our invited speakers were followed by a discussion moderated by **Fieke Jansen**. Jansen kicked off the conversation by pointing out how all the interventions suggested that data, no matter how useful they might be, are not the answer in themselves, since political and social structures are superposed on them. Consequently, ethical dilemmas and even threats are always an inherent part of ‘research for the social good’ on the basis of data.

The first topic for discussion revolved around complementing Ryan’s take on the challenges and promises of action research, as seen from the eyes of activists. Ryan underlined how timing is a crucial barrier, since activists generally want things to occur fast, whereas it can take several years for research to have tangible outcomes. Pezzani suggested that such barrier has become particularly evident now that the militant and the scholar are becoming the same figure, therefore signalling a *need to think of institutions* that support the work of this hybrid figure.

The speakers then turned to another critical element of action research: the criteria through which cases are selected, a decision that has both scientific and political implications. Pezzani, referring to his experience, argued that political relevance and methodological benefit should be two complementary criteria orienting this decision. On the one hand, they shed light about what to work on by identifying cases that push the political edge and call for an urgent intervention. On the other hand, cases are best suited for these projects when they also help to develop new methodologies that can possibly be replicated in other contexts. In addition, it is always necessary to keep in mind some background questions: what is the political effect of what we might achieve? Is it a positive effect for the people we collaborate with or advocate for? Who is going to gain from this?

Next under discussion was the issue of methodology, well exemplified by the Syrian Archive and its emphasis on novel verification methodologies. Deutch and Para agreed that the methodological aspect is crucial for activist research, and that their verification protocol, which privileges the sources from networks on the ground while enriching and cross-referencing details, leads to the rejection of a considerable amount of entries, due to the presence of propaganda and misleading content. This latter reflection brought up another crucial input for the discussion; the question of what does it mean to do ‘responsible and critical data activism’. Ryan explained that this should mean first and foremost to ‘do no harm’, which requires to regularly check with the people involved in social processes. Pezzani added that activist-researchers should aim for a status of ‘*militant objectivity*’ that

does not consider truth as something that is out there, but something that is constructed from a clear epistemological position and through a strong commitment. Ryan highlighted that being responsible and critical sometimes requires telling people things they do not want to hear. Nevertheless, Deutch added, feeding back to the activists is fundamental because otherwise research lacks transparency.

The discussion ended by reflecting upon the tension between being embedded in an activist group and remaining objective as a researcher. Pezzani called into question whether a distinction between academics and activists should be emphasized at all, referring back to his notion of ‘critical proximity’; to resolve this tension we should go beyond the idea that objectivity has to do with distance. Ryan added that this tension between objectivity, closeness and distance should be seen *as dialectic*: researchers should immerse themselves, then take distance when formalizing problems, to subsequently get closer again to address challenges in a way that is meaningful for the community they want to *research with*.

Day 2. The workshop: A Focused Encounter between activist-researchers and researching-activists

DATIVE PI Stefania Milan opened the day by introducing one of DATIVE’s core concerns: maintaining a critical attitude to the hierarchical ways in which academia works. That is the reason why DATIVE is trying to *imagine a different kind of academic practice*, a process that necessarily passes by the creation of spaces for dialogue such as this focused encounter, where the quest for alternatives occurs in a collaborative fashion. Therefore, Milan stated, the idea behind the event was to bring people together and learn from the different ways in which they engage with research, to discover how can we co-determine priorities and develop a collaborative agenda that prevents academia from asking questions that are of interest only to itself. In this respect, for DATIVE research is ‘activism by other means’ (see <https://data-activism.net/2015/10/welcome/>).

The morning session of Day 2 started with three talks by Ryan, Pezzani, Deutch and Para. Building on Day 1, the presentations went into more detail with respect to their central concepts, methodology, and techniques for organizing activism. Different concepts played a central role during the presentations of each of the speakers: Ryan elaborated on how notions of social equality and inclusion are steering her research agenda, whereas Pezzani highlighted how the idea of a ‘forensic turn’ is central to his work: objects have become material witnesses of affairs, turning (for instance) the sea into an archive. Finally, Deutch and Para emphasized how the word *open* in their take on ‘Open Source Intelligence’ is also tied to the philosophy of free software and open source, besides being associated to the use of sources that are openly available. The roundtable that followed was moderated by Lonneke van der Velden, who highlighted a few central themes brought up by the speakers:

the role of theory and how theory relates to the specific methods deployed, the importance of ethics, and the relation between academic institutions and activists.

In relation to the first topic, Ryan argued that theory is a very relevant component of the work conducted within MRAP. This does not mean that researchers explicitly refer to theoretical concepts, but instead to the need for research to incorporate, for example, a 'theory of power' that allows for critical reflection about notions of 'democracy', the 'social' and 'good'--all concepts whose shifting and variegated meanings need explication. Furthermore, and specifically in relation to the 'do no harm' principle, one needs to define of harm in the first place to be faithful to such principle. Similarly, one needs a theory of movement building in order to cope with the tensions that arise in the process. Pezzani underlined that theory in fact has always provided activists the space to think about what they are doing, as opposed to the academic view that activists are stuck on the ground. Moreover, academics should learn from activists, given that the academic theoretical discourse is often self-referential, while activist theory is all about making a difference. Although their effort is rather concrete and thus less theory-oriented, Deutch and Para acknowledged that theory is necessarily incorporated in their work; using statistics to highlight patterns of power dynamics and inequality, which can be inferred from large data collection, undoubtedly generates theory. Moreover, The Syrian Archive is not only an 'archiving project', but also a 'tech project', which means that the methodology they are trying to build is heavily influenced by theory, particularly that related to the open source philosophy. This hints to an important element of the Syrian Archive project: open source is understood not just as a specific software policy, but more generally as a matter of openness and transparency of protocols and practices.

The group discussion turned then to the issue of ethics, as foregrounded, for example, by the tension between being transparent and avoiding putting people at risk. Pezzani commented that solving this issue perhaps implies challenging the common assumption that visibility and openness are inherently good while invisibility and secrecy are inherently bad, a conundrum that can be very well exemplified by the topics of privacy and security. Instead, we should think visibility and secrecy as entangled in complex ways. For example, secrecy does not only operate by suppressing information, but also by overflowing a system with information.

Deutch and Para also reflected upon the ethical dilemma posed by developing software and performing research that resembles what corporate and state surveillance actors use and do. According to them, there are some workarounds to cope with the ethical issues specifically related to their work, such as excluding private Facebook profiles or information which may be too sensitive. On the other hand, they have also faced the question about whether it is necessary to continue abiding by ethical standards when dealing with unethical

actors. Ethical concerns, in a sense, might be a function of power-relations. Pezzani joined in by explaining how Forensic Architecture's projects repurpose surveillance technologies to turn 'the sight back to' policing actors, which triggered a question from the audience about whether using technologies developed within policing systems might be inherently bound to reproduce those systems. According to him, although this is indeed a problematic issue, such a risk can be mediated by engaging the affected communities, and continuously reflecting upon whether the investigation contributes to a 'disobedient gaze', rather than merely a vigilant one.

The relation between academic institutions and activists could only be briefly explored. Ryan stressed the importance of working in cycles to assess whether one indeed does research that matters. This method includes reflecting upon failed campaigns, as well as upon whether researchers and activists are still working in conditions of equality. It also means critically reflecting on the funding system, and having the courage to reject a grant if it does not meet the research goals of the researcher and the interests of the community involved. Ryan also stated that the role and attitude of one's research institution can change over time, which means that activist-researchers need to be prepared for periods of precariousness. Building upon this point, Pezzani explained how the Forensic Architecture Project is a kind of 'in between' institution. It was founded thanks to a research grant of the European Research Council, but now acts as a separate agency that also receives funding from other sources for conducting investigations. At the same time, the project is still connected to Goldsmiths, which gives the researchers considerable institutional support. Still, even though Forensic Architecture enjoys this in-between position, funding can hardly cover the overhead. In comparison, the Syrian Archive works with academic partners but is entirely run by volunteers, which means that the project is in constantly in need of funding.

Notes from the workshop

The afternoon session of Day 2 was thought as a 'focused encounter', where a range of people cross-cutting the academic and activist boundaries could brainstorm together, in order to set the groundwork for an activist-researchers/researching-activists agenda.

Kersti Wissenbach, who facilitated the session, started by summarizing some insights from the previous part of the event, to provide input to three workgroups, filled up by rotation: 1) activist-researcher (work) dynamics and relationships: what would it take for activist-research to happen? 2) creating a collective and an infrastructure: what are the (institutional) conditions for data-activist research? 3) ethics of engagement: how would responsible data-activist research look like? Each topic was explored through three brainstorming sessions, with people shifting groups to contribute to each topic. What follows is a summary of this rich discussion.

Group 1: Activist research dynamics and relationships

- Research should be 'in vivo' as opposed to 'in vitro'. Researchers have to be aware that their work deals with living subjects. Therefore, research should be *with* rather than *about* communities.
- The conditions of activist research are always precarious. In this sense, it is important to recognise that activists are often *abused*, in the sense that it is their bodies which are used as tools to achieve their goals. The collaboration with academia could potentially diminish the risks emerging from this precarious condition.
- Activist research should privilege dialogue with people rather than institutions, while at the same time maintaining a cautious approach in relation to who is recognised as an institutional interlocutor. The establishment of formal channels of communication, almost with a unionist approach, could be beneficial.
- It is necessary to move from the production of even more data about the phenomena we are interested in, towards being able to identify more elaborate goals as activists. This could be achieved through a more goal-driven approach.
- There is a need to discuss in more depth the different implications of subjectivity and objectivity for academia and activism. For example, the fact that the requirement of objectivity impacts research and activism differently was identified as one of the variables making building bridges between both activities difficult.
- There is a problem of knowledge translation: academia produces information that is not necessarily useful or usable for activist purposes. At the same time, activists' questions often do not address the literature produced and discussed within academia. Consequently, we need to have people that can speak both 'languages'.
- The problem above could be addressed by the creation of joint community of practice as well as specific infrastructure, to collaboratively decide what needs to be researched. In other words, we need to identify both 'gaps in the literature' and 'gaps on the ground'.
- Academia needs to take into account that shared events and concrete spaces bridge research and activism better than publications.
- Academia is in urgent need of a critical reflection around how the forms and products of academic research influence the type of knowledge we seek and generate. For example, academia could be more critical about the idea that only what is tangible counts as something to be valued as output. Network-building, for instance, is of crucial importance but might be less visible than publishing in a peer-reviewed journal.
- Academia and activism need to acknowledge the divisions within both communities and work with them to reduce unwanted impacts.

- We should question the credentials of scientific knowledge: where does the legitimacy of research come from? This legitimacy should be more closely tied to the fact that research is able to address social problems.
- We have to work on 'asking the right questions'. However, this is a highly political category: who gets to determine what questions can be asked? Incorporating social goals in the research process is a good starting point.

Group 2: Creating infrastructures and institutions

- The group was supposed to reflect around what are the necessary conditions for data activist research, but participants recursively noticed the need to a) define what data activism research is in the first place, and b) discuss how to socialise the knowledge produced while answering this question, in order to create common understandings.
- What does it mean to do research in reality? When activism and research meet there is a need to redefine the frameworks they work with, to make them compatible. This can be achieved by the creation of a common language.
- There are many insecurities associated with being an activist, and therefore it may be necessary to create infrastructures that tackle this uncertainty. For example, individual activists are constantly in danger of getting into brawls with corporations, without having anyone to back them up. Even activists within academia might be defenceless if they repeatedly get in trouble (which may also affect their institutions).
- Ethics can be a double-sided sword: ethics checks have become a way in which universities avoid supporting research that is considered risky. Thus, it is necessary to reimagine the institutional frameworks we put in place, to allow meaningful research to be carried out while respecting data and practices of the research subjects.
- Wider organisational processes need to be considered as a way to diminish the power imbalance between activists and other actors, such as corporations and state institutions.
- Institutions to be created to support activist-researchers include unions and insurance schemes, to support them in case of repression or court cases. A union would allow activist-researchers and researching-activists to find strength in numbers, while the insurance scheme would diminish and partially offset the risk of performing sensitive activism and/or research.

Group 3: Ethics of engagement

- Ethics can be interpreted either as an 'ethic of minimum ideals' (e.g. do no harm, reflect on consequences) or as an 'ethic of highest ideals' (e.g. an ideal model that we want to showcase).

- An ethical minimum should be articulated around evidence, and any negotiation on ethical conduct should be evidence-based. However, the notion of evidence can be tricky: e.g. security practice is a lot about 'looking into the future', something that cannot rely on evidences only, but needs also hearsay.
- There might be a difference between being responsible as an organization and being responsible as an individual. An organization needs to think ahead about future cooperation, whereas individuals might enjoy slightly more freedom.
- At the organizational level, there are hierarchies of missions and driving purposes that set ethics. Action-oriented research is not only about action but also about missions. Ethics come from the organisation's mission, but usually people working in ethics think that ethics are indeed non-instrumental and should not be negotiable even if missions do not match.
- Ethics should be process-driven and should go beyond a check-list. An ethics of engagement is necessarily pragmatic ethics. There is ethics as universal commitment to human beings, but the ethics of engagement are necessarily situated: e.g. when missions do not match anymore, it is ethical to break an ongoing engagement.
- There is an ethical issue related to the state of surveillance we operate in. The first contact with communities is probably the biggest problem: to contact someone can be a form of exposure. We should minimize the details we give on email and privilege face-to-face interaction.
- It is necessary to reflect, both within academia and activism, as to who would we accept money from, and with which groups would we collaborate with. The independence of research should be non-negotiable.
- Apart from reflecting about what ethics is, we also need to think what engagement is. Engagement is, in the first place, time. We need to find real time to spend with the people we are researching with. We need to invest time to build trust relationships that do not end in sporadic contacts. This implies showing respect for the context of activism: activists often do not have much free time and already invest energies elsewhere, but engaging in a research asks time and energies from them.
- Although there is indeed a strong need to create a common language so people coming from different contexts can develop joint work, it is important that academia does not reproduce violent practices in which it uses its authority to impose meanings and set the terms of the discussion.

Conclusive remarks

After the insights from the breakout discussions were presented and discussed collectively, Wissenbach and Milan asked the participants to share ideas about potential next steps to advance a data-activist research agenda. These include

- Creating a database of skills/expertise/topics of interest, which would showcase the diversity of the activist community as well as academia, and represent a point of entry to find potential collaborators. It would show what distinct actors can offer each other, and in what way they could benefit from collaborating.
- Building a guidebook of best practices that helps to create a common ground within the community, addressing methodologies, concerns, assumptions and problems. This could clarify to practitioners many of the insights from academia, and vice versa.
- Producing joint grant proposals and collectively mapping grant opportunities to guarantee the sustainability of diverse projects.
- Find an anchor for collective conversations to take place, so they do not digress aimlessly. This could be achieved by the identification of a concrete output from a conversation between academia and practitioners after the selection of a problem to be tackled collectively.
- Producing a typology of data activism that helps practitioners to position themselves in the spectrum, which also would help others to identify sources of inspiration/help.
- Activism implies getting in touch with people who do not necessarily think the same way. Therefore, it is necessary to actively bring questions and conversation outside closed spaces and networks. On the other hand, the NGO model might not be appropriate to tackle the threats coming from corporations rather than governments. Finding and creating new spaces is key.

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