

IJIDI: Book Review

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The issues around big data have spurred articles, documentaries, and television episodes about what individuals, the state, private corporations, and institutions of higher education have collected about people, communities, and so on. The constant attention has increased the conversation about the who, what, and why of data collection. *Uncertain Archives: Critical Keywords for Big Data* is an edited volume that contains 61 essays that explore critical keywords that help us analyze the intersections of big data with race, gender, class, nationality, sexuality, politics, humanities, social sciences, information science, and other identities and disciplines. The vision and purpose of this volume developed from the research undertaken by the Uncertain Archives research group at the University of Copenhagen's Department of Arts and Cultural Studies. The group comprises scholars and artists in Denmark and abroad focusing on the unknowns, the errors, and vulnerabilities of archives in an age of datafication.

The volume begins with an introduction that outlines the definition of data and archives and how uncertainty can provide a broader understanding of big data. Following this are the comprehensive keyword essays by different authors that are arranged in alphabetical order by keyword. Contributing authors comprise various scholars, activists, and artists from other disciplines, sexualities, ethnic and racial identities, and nationalities (including non-Western) and they cite scholars from multiple backgrounds. Each essay defines the term, provides real-world examples and figures for illustrative purposes, and detailed references for further reading. Some of the pieces build on, challenge, or counter each other and examine the ways diversity and inclusion intersect with the keyword. The editors choose to organize the volume alphabetically and not thematically. While it gives the aesthetic of an encyclopedia, the book would be more accessible to an entry-level scholar if the heteroglossia was organized into sections and would have made the cross-discipline conversation and discussions stronger.

This work is primarily aimed at those at post-secondary institutions. It would be of interest to information professionals, information scientists, social science, and humanities scholars. It provides insight into how one can think about how data is stored, collected, used, preserved, and accessed. The work is an excellent reference tool to begin thinking about the issues represented and explored in each essay. The essays encourage professionals to think about the intersection between people, gender, sexuality, technology, emotions, affect, data, capitalism, and commodification. Additionally, it illustrates that scholars in information and library science and cultural heritage should look to other disciplines, including unexpected ones, such as the

arts, fashion, cartography, feminism, Black feminism, geology, and geography, and so on, to explore concepts that influence how we see the world. The authors challenge these professionals to reexamine their practices and acknowledge that the work that they are doing is not neutral and not to be beholden to “vocational awe” (Ettarh, 2018). The content has several implications for libraries and special collections, especially as they develop new projects and tools, undergo strategic planning, make personnel decisions, and collection development purchases (i.e., library databases and archival donations). By examining big data, technology, and knowledge systems through the lens of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice, we can see how hierarchical power is, and who documents, and who gets documented. The authors of the essays do an excellent job explaining the context of their examples, using historical events and subjects, such as Black Lives Matter, Henrietta Lacks, Granted Clothing, and Forever 21, which is helpful for audiences who are not from the region or the field of study.

The essays address both practical issues relating to archival management and theory. “Digital Humanities” by Roopika Risam and “Remains” by Tonia Sutherland explored issues relating to the digital representation of Black people and bodies in the archival and digital records. Risam denotes that digital humanities projects can either reinforce or challenge hegemony. When a scholar or an archival repository participates in such endeavors, they need to be conscious of the narrative. Furthermore, information professionals should be using this space to bring the voices of the global south, women, Indigenous people, Black people, and non-Black people, not only in terms of the records but also in developing and shaping the tools and their focus. However, Sutherland cautions scholars, academics, and information professionals that they must work not to create harm, but recognize that the historical record is traumatic for some communities when they undertake such projects. Sutherland denotes the following information sources as spaces where this could occur: documents of enslavement, white supremacist pamphlets, and the videos of Black people murdered at the hands of the police. Furthermore, she explores the tension between documenting historical events and victims and perpetrators of violence and the right to be forgotten. Other essays in the volume continue the discussion about power and control, including “Metadata” by Amelia Acker and “(Mis)gendering” by Os Keyes. These essays focus on how systems, cultural heritage repositories, and individuals organize and access information, thus, creating harm and empowering some communities and populations. Keyes explicitly provides a personal example of being unexpectedly outed as a transgender person in a store; and noted that this is a constant fear that some people have because databases have information stored about their previous life (p. 339). Thus, this impacts how they navigate the world. Acker’s essay explores the implications of who controls how metadata is represented and how it can reinforce social biases. Once a person or community is sorted into a category in the back-end, it can be challenging, if not impossible, to withdraw or change.

This volume also explores the ways that individuals choose to use or to opt-out of participating in big data, as seen in the essays “Detox” by Pepita Hesselberth, “Self-Tracking” by Natasha Dow Schüll, “Affect” by Marika Cifor, and “Obfuscation” by Mushon Zer-Aviv. Hesselberth examines the conversations about the term, expressly what is toxic and what one needs to “detox” from, and examples of projects that claim to assist individuals in changing either their behavior manually or by using technology to reduce their carbon footprint. On the opposite spectrum is Schüll, discussing the complexities of how individuals use data to understand patterns about themselves and outline the term “quantitative autobiography” (p. 463). Individuals who participate in big data in this way work to gain a sense of freedom and self-transformation. Nevertheless, companies such as Facebook and Instagram exploit users’ need for connection and sentiment for profit. Cifor provides the example of The AIDS Memorial (TAM) archive on

Instagram, where families and friends post images to memorialize loved ones. Still, then, in turn, Instagram uses the user engagement information to target and sell advertisements and services (p. 42). The tension between memorialization and commodity is seen here. To not be a part of this system, some individuals work to obfuscate their online presence and disrupt government and corporate surveillance. Zer-Aviv focuses on the ways big data have been used to erode the privacy of individuals. Due to anxiety about surveillance culture, activists created tools to counteract or obfuscate data (i.e., either by making white data noise or developing TOR networks). These activities have resulted in conversations about the ethics around obfuscating data, which may obstruct data used to help communities. Additionally, Zer-Aviv denotes a concern that particular communities will be at risk of surveillance because of a lack of digital literacy and access to tools to evade such activities. Library and information science professionals can learn from these discussions to provide their stakeholders with the digital literacy training and understanding of how to navigate the intricacies with big data.

Keywords explored in this volume also unpacked who is considered an archivist as denoted in “Hashtag Archiving” by Tara L. Conley and “Field” by Shannon Mattern. Conley examines how researchers who conduct Twitter research could be imagined as archivists, especially as they build a corpus of material to document a historical event based on a specific hashtag (i.e., #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and #Blackat[insertcollege/university]). Mattern further explores what this means for geoscientists and geological curators who work with climate change information sources/data. They get their data from both the natural world (i.e., rocks, mud, tree rings, etc.) and computer models. Mattern more than Conley grapples with the implications of sustainability of such large data sets and its impact on the environment for preserving this information for the long-term. She cites archivist Eira Tansey, one of the information professionals concerned about the financial and environmental cost of data centers’ climate-controlled storage of archival records. As an archivist, who works in the southeast coast of the U.S., I am acutely aware of the rising sea levels and the destructive nature of storms, such as hurricanes. The uncertainty that this brings every year can make it hard to plan and to be good stewards of collections.

This volume aims and encourages us to lean into uncertainty about big data. Thus, it does not strive to provide readers with the answers about how one should or should not engage with data, big or otherwise. Instead, the authors want us to know the different elements and concepts that impact how we see ourselves and others in data and how external parties are using this. By doing so, readers can examine how diversity, equity, and inclusion can create new avenues in the world of big data. By embracing the uncertainty, we are free to imagine new ideas and concepts; and challenge/counter old ones.

References

Ettarh, F. (2018). Vocational awe and librarianship: The lies we tell ourselves. *In the Library With the Lead Pipe*. <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/>

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