OPENNESS

POLITICS / PRACTICES / POETICS

This collection brings together academics, archivists, artists, and activists whose thought and practices make critical intervention into cultural phenomenon of open data. The sub-title of this publication – politics /practices / poetics – reveals a close entwinement between thought and practice, between thinking and making. The contributions offer critical perspectives combined with implications for practice, or they in themselves are practices (such as performances, discussions, acts of care, or visualisations). Each contribution is an open data project in action. Openness is part of the Living Archives research project.

http://livingarchives.mah.se/

https://medium.com/the-politics-practices-and-poetics-of-openness

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POLITICS / PRACTICES / POETICS

Details

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Contents

Preface

Susan Kozel

Why this publication on Openness?

Let us begin with form. Or rather format. Openness has been released in three versions. The collected articles appeared as a series on medium.com (1/3).[1] Next they were made available as a freely downloadable PDF (2/3)[2], and finally as a limited hand bound print run of approximately 30 volumes (3/3). These are iterations on openness comprising 18 contributions existing, to cite Jean Luc Nancy, "between exposed thought and knotty intimacy" within a Commerce of Thinking (Nancy 2009, 3). These 3 versions travel across materialities. They are re-mediated, but to me it feels like a sort of de-mediation – a stripping away – as we moved over time from the digital versions toward the print version. Video had to be unspooled into image frames, audio into fragmented text transcriptions. These iterations render Nancy's argument multiple both in form and in voice, without a doubt "born in agitation and anxiety, in the fermentation of a form" (ibid) but not in search of anything as unified as a coherent style or position.

The temporal dimension of each version of Openness ranges from relative ephemerality to potential longevity.

This publication (in whichever form you read it) reveals the assemblages surrounding and shaping such projects at the same time as each version enacts a slightly different assemblage. For example, medium.com is located in a wider online journalistic forum with a lightly political voice and largely American perspective. The PDF version lives through our research project's online presence and the shared personal and academic networks of the researchers. The print publication has a distribution that occupies both ends of a public spectrum: highly personal as it sits on our shelves at home or in the homes of selected friends, and highly institutional as, bearing an ISBN number, it will be sent to various national libraries and archives. The temporal dimension of each version of Openness ranges from relative ephemerality to potential longevity: medium.com exists now, but could disappear at any point; our university's web presence and digital archives may be a guarantee of greater longevity; and the bound hardcopy versions lodged in libraries could last longer. Archiving has always been unpredictable over time, but paradoxically in the digital age one of the best ways to ensure longevity is printing and storing (it is also one of the most environmentally sound ways, given the energy costs of powering and cooling vast server farms).

The sub-title of this publication "politics /practices / poetics" reveals a close entwinement between thought and practice, between thinking and making. We are not just offering abstract arguments on open data and not just implementing technological or social methods for distributing or accessing data. The contributions offer critical perspectives combined with implications for practice, or they in themselves are practices (such as performance, discussion, acts of care, visualisations). Each contribution is an open data project in action.

The articles are paired, not because they share an approach, but because reading them together might promote a dialogic quality: as if they are talking to each other. Early editorial discussions evoked the metaphor of the A Side and B Side of a vinyl record, but this implied a dominant recording and a subversive one, which did not suit our purposes. But the pairing remained. Two authors might approach a similar topic from

1   https://medium.com/the-politics-practices-and-poetics-of-openness
2   http://livingarchives.mah.se/

different perspectives or they might offer compatible approaches to different topics. The voices vary from academic to more poetic or personal, and referencing conventions are non-uniform. The contributions that took advantage of medium.com's ability to display audio and visual media easily had to be de-mediated into alternate forms for the graphic layout of the PDF and book forms, but in the process a different dynamics were generated, or at least different poetic qualities.

The contributions to Openness offer critical perspectives combined with implications for practice, or they in themselves are practices.

The contributions for Openness were solicited according to the academic conventions of an open call. They were subject to peer review, revisions by the authors, and eventual copyediting. Copyright free images were selected. Part of the experiment was to follow an academic-yet-open process: following scholarly procedures to generate conceptual depth and quality of writing, but attempting to reduce gate-keeping and permit a range of voices and contributions. The process was, true to academic form, quite slow.

Open Data in relation to Archives

Openness is part of the Living Archives research project located at Malmö University, funded by the Swedish National Research Council (VR) under the rubric of an initiative called the Digitized Society. The project lasted from 2013-2017, which turned out to be a pivotal time in global techno-culture to reflect upon data and archives. During this period we witnessed the impact of Snowden and Wikileaks; the expansion of the Internet-of-Things, the quantified self, and social media; and increased applications of Big Data combined with network analytics.

Our interdisciplinary group of researchers (from philosophy, interaction design, computer science, performance, art history, art practice, cultural studies, education and media) decided to consider archival practices rather than archives as repositories, never having as a goal the direct digitisation of archives but rather a critical and expansive approach to archives. The what, how, from whom and by whom of archives became our various foci. This expansion of the construct of the archive coincided with concerns for access, inclusion and participation, or at least with recognizing that archives tend to be the bastions of the powerful with weaknesses or blind spots when it comes to inclusion of minority voices and lives (Derrida 1996). In our research, archiving practices resulting in digital or analogue traces became twinned with archiving in corporeal forms, the somatic or bodily processes of remembering/forgetting/re-enacting (Schneider 2011).

Archiving practices resulting in digital or analogue traces are twinned with archiving in corporeal forms.

The two research strands of the Living Archives project are Performing Memory and Open Data.[3] The Openness publication, in its various forms, comes out of the latter strand. In fact, it reflects the unravelling of research assumptions and their re-assembling. Here's how:

In 2012 we proposed to approach open data, inclusion and access by initiating a technology-driven experiment in crowd sourced metadata tagging. On a specific level, we were inspired at that time by the Ghost Rockets initiative.[4] Building on a cultural fascination with UFOs and the timely release of Swedish government (military) archives relating to the reported sightings of planetary visitors in northern Sweden, Ghost Rockets proposed to integrate a game model for generating metadata with something akin to The Guardian newspaper's experiment in crowdsourced data analysis of MP's (members of parliament's) expense accounts.[5] More generally, our proposal was caught in the spirit of open data from the early part of this century, and we took inspiration from a range of valid and laudable initiatives:

Open Data Handbook[6]

Europeana Linked Open Data to connect and enrich metadata[7]

Open Archives[8]

Initiatives involving visualisations and mashups for revealing spending[9] or crime statistics[10]

Cultural crowdsourcing initiatives[11]

Metadata

While recognising that there are clearly valid archival problems around metadata (tending to be imprecise, patchy when handling sensitive material, categories becoming obsolete or language inappropriate over time, often obtained through closed, arbitrary or at least veiled institutional processes, suffering from institutional underfunding) we rapidly realised the innate risks to implementing yet another technological solution to archiving problems.

We could clearly contribute a small infrastructural software application relating to opening up the process of metadata tagging but this no longer sat easily with us, and in saying "us" I'm including the members of the research team from computing science and those from the humanities and arts. It became impossible to ignore that there is too much emphasis on the political and technological work of establishing open data projects and not enough on studying the discursive, material, social and cross-cultural realities of open data creation, archiving and distribution. Further, the sort of data included in open data tended to be that of high public policy and commercial reuse value, like economic and spatial data with data still seen as a "product to be stored and distributed" (Kitchin, 52).

Open data can be "both extremely open and terribly closed at the same time"

The paradox of open data is that huge releases of information manage to be "both extremely open and terribly closed at the same time" (Rogers, 2009). Open because if you know where to look there can be unprecedented access to civic data, but closed because many details remain blacked out or impossible to

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4   http://www.ghostrockets.se/
5   https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2009/jun/18/mps-expenses-houseofcommons
6   http://opendatahandbook.org/
7   http://labs.europeana.eu/api/linked-open-data-introduction
8   http://www.openarchives.org/
9   http://openspending.org/
10   http://www.bbc.co.uk/truthaboutcrime/crimemap/
11   http://www.onedayonearth.org and http://foursquare.com

analyse due to sheer volume (as with Big Data) or opaque metadata and representation conventions. I recall a conversation with a meteorologist at a conference on open data who said he would be happy to let me have access to their data flow from satellites but said it would be pointless because I would not know how to make sense of it. The warm feeling of being able to access flows of data previously closed to me rapidly evaporated, leaving me feeling confused and a little cheated.

Open Data / Big Data

Since 2012 the data climate has changed significantly, in particular due to Wikileaks on-going activities and the continued reverberations of Edward Snowden's revelations on the extent of illegal personal data capture sanctioned unofficially by British and US government agencies and telecom service providers. A subtle emotional shift in the framing of open data occurred, from civic data to personal data, from an abstract sense of quantified data necessary for managing and governing citizens or for delivering services to populations (such as schools and fire departments) to the data of private people in their personal lives. In some respects, Snowden shattered the wall between big data and small data, revealing that both categories are subject to similar capture and storage, and that this can happen in legally grey areas or be overtly illegal, contravening the laws of a government and the privacy rights of its citizens. As such, open data can no longer be seen as a politically neutral resource. The what, how, from whom, and by whom take on greater significance, as does the interpretation of data. Citing Florian Cramer, "there has never been as much interpretation going on than in the era of analytics" (Cramer, 2016). For of course false, misleading or partial data is still data, and the truth of any data triangulation is only as effective as its algorithms and the people who eventually interpret the results.

Open data can no longer be seen as a politically neutral resource.

The unravelling invited by this publication on openness reveals how cultural imaginaries shape a sense of what open data are or might be. Such imaginaries come from as diverse sources as the natural world and from neoliberal politics. Take, for example, the mixed legacy of the "data wants to be free" mantra, closely allied with Stewart Brand's (founder of the Whole Earth Catalogue in the 1960s) famous statement that "information wants to be free." This belief presents an analogy with dynamic elements within the natural world, aligning data circulation with basic rights to clean air and water and resulting in argument that data should not be owned but freely available to all. This stance is closely allied to the argument that regulation or critical intervention are inappropriate or unnecessary, echoing the rhetoric of the free market needing no regulation because it has innate checks and balances. This natural resource is also perceived to be abundant, and somehow pure. In close parallel to the naturalistic metaphors, open data occupy a key place in neoliberal political beliefs that economic value can be created by the free circulation of data, including the exploitation of what has been called "data exhaust" -- data mistakenly deemed to be useless until it can be monetised in new ways (Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier 2013, 113).

These now valuable tiny transactions make up what was framed as data exhaust (useless data) only a few years ago.

Unfettered data circulation is cited as a driving force for "innovation" (Goldstein and Dyson, 2013). Promoting "transparency of decision-making," generating "accountability for elected and appointed officials,"

spurring "greater citizen engagement," and producing economic value "beyond the walls of governments" have become the contemporary civic corollaries of the data as a natural force metaphor (Chui et al, 2013, 163). The language is so seductive that it is hard to critique, hard to hold in our minds the growing sense of what is really happening with the shiny rhetoric. It is equally hard to get our heads around the extent to which open data swallow up the micro activities of a person that may not be consciously or willingly given: my texts and phone messages, my location as determined incessantly by my mobile phones, my internet searches and my amazon purchase records, the GPS location I send texts from, the time of day or night I send them. I have deliberately inserted "my" in the above list to emphasise the embeddedness of bodily actions, perceptions and emotions within that border where open data gives way to big data. These now valuable tiny transactions make up what was framed as data exhaust (useless data) only a few years ago, "data that is shed as a byproduct of people's actions and movements in the world. For the Internet, it describes users' online interactions: where they click, how long they look at a page, where the mouse-cursor hovers, what they type, and more" (Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier 2013, 113). Perception, attention and choices not made but pondered become included in data sets – open and proprietary.

The Non-inevitability of Data

Open data bleed into big data, and a tacit assumption regarding the inevitability of full data circulation is created. There is a performativity in this statement, meaning a quality of bringing something into existence by actions or thoughts that construct a reality. In this case, the reality of the inevitability of data is the futility of attempting to question or slow an inexorable progression of data towards massive generation, circulation, capture and storage. Public attitudes and civic policy tend to be either favourably disposed or fatalistically resigned to there being nothing that we can do to stop it. Our abilities to imagine the data traces we leave on a daily basis and sheer volume of data in circulation are as challenged as our abilities to formulate political or activist strategies for intervening in the massive capture of data enacted by corporations and government agencies, where the laws sometimes follow the actions, retroactively legalising what has already been done.

The non-inevitability of data, opens scope for changing attitudes and behaviours

The somewhat awkward phrase, the non-inevitability of data, opens scope for changing attitudes and behaviours to promote a "new generation of responsive and responsible data work." (Wilson cited in Kitchin 2014) The first step toward positing a non-inevitability of full data capture is questioning the assumptions around open data and big data, and speculatively constructing practices that cannot be captured, refuse to be captured, or insist on being captured and circulated differently. Non-inevitability articulates "registers within which interventions can and are already being made" (ibid). This publication aims to contribute to such speculation.

"Cloudiness of Data" versus Data in The Cloud

Illegally obtained data from unsuspecting telecommunications users sits in counterpoint with the astonishing amount of data willingly provided through social media (and then used to enhance the profit of multinational corporations like Google, facebook and SnapChat.) In 2012 the economic construct of data-funded had not entered our awareness, and still in 2014 people genuinely believed that Snap Chat's disappearing images actually disappeared (instead of living on servers somewhere contributing to data that might be open to some but not to others). Sharon Mattern captures a cultural confusion when she states that there is considerable "imprecision" in how data are conceived, "cloudiness" in how data are derived, analysed and put to use (Mattern cited in Kitchin, 2014). When this cultural ambiguity is given further academic depth by realising that ontologies (what data are), epistemologies (how data construct knowledge), methodologies (ways to handle and research data), techniques, tools and infrastructures for sorting and storing data are entwined, we see that cloudiness regarding open data affects a very broad spectrum indeed, and increasingly impacts our daily lives. It also reveals a range of explicitly and implicitly held stances:

Open Data is not Open enough (but should be)

Open Data is not Accessible/Inclusive enough (but should be)

Data should not be Open (a position shared by cypherpunks – radical encryption advocates for personal data – and corporations alike)

Thus, within our project on archiving, the unravelling of open data began as we decided to better understand openness and what this means not just for our particular research into archiving, but what it might mean more broadly as a concept and as a set of practices or sensibilities. This was our way to question the technological fix to social problems implicit in a lot of open data, or as Haraway says with her typical wit and accuracy, to question the hope that "technology will come to the rescue of its naughty but very clever children (Haraway 2016, 3). Openness falls into her category of the what/how, of thinking and making, as we ask simultaneously what open data are and how we enter into the data choreographies that swirl around us on a daily basis. Then we might suggest alternate formations and practices.

"Data matter and have matter"

There is, however, one assumption that has not been unravelled, "data matter and have matter" (Kitchin 2014). This publication is not based on a disregard for or a disinterest in data, but quite the opposite – we care tremendously about data.

In expanding, and to use a popular term at present, "troubling" (Haraway 2016) openness we looked to what could be called its others. This refers both to people and materials that have been excluded from archives despite wanting to be included, and those who might want to stay outside the big data surge in data capture, storage, archiving and analysis. An additional category is those who might want to be included in archives and the circulation of digital data, but on their own terms.

It is important to state, once again, that we do not dismiss the need for open data or for transparency on the part of corporations and governments: we need access to data. In calling for a critical account of open data we are opening the spectrum of voices and helping to cultivate new cultural imaginaries, sensibilities and practices concerning open data, and its sibling Big Data. To give a final word to Richard Topgaard, with much appreciation for his role in the early stages of shaping these publications: "I am probably out on thin ice." We are all on thin ice with this publication, and with our expanding datafied existences.

Susan Kozel (March 2017)

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