



## Post, Mine, Repeat: social media data mining becomes ordinary

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Post, Mine, Repeat: social media data mining becomes ordinary**, by Helen Kennedy, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 262 pp., £63.00 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-1-137-35398-6

In times of datafication, we are producing more and more social media (and other) data. But this opens up new avenues for it to be collected, stored, classified, analysed, and disseminated: for it to be *mined*, in other words. But data mining is not always carried out by the big players, which include social media corporations like Facebook, and government and security organisations like the US' National Security Agency (NSA) and the UK's Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ). Ordinary actors are now harnessing technologies for mining people's social media data, and these include public sector organisations (such as local city councils, local museums, and universities), social media insights companies, academics, and social and community groups. Such organisations contribute to the structure of our daily lives yet scholarly insights into their practices are in short supply, making Helen Kennedy's 2016 book *Post, Mine, Repeat: Social media data mining becomes ordinary* a groundbreaking contribution.

The author draws on interviews, focus groups, participant observation and action research with a range of ordinary actors from projects undertaken in the early-to-mid 2010s, a key moment of increased interest in mining social media data. The *ordinariness* of this practice can be read as the book's central intervention. Kennedy uses this term to refer at once to data mining's 'everyday-ness', 'commonplace-ness', and 'ubiquity' (2016, p. 7) (see also McCarthy, 2008; Silverstone, 1994). She goes inside the ordinary organisations that make up our daily lives, shifting scholarly attention away from high-profile cases like the Snowden revelations. This is what makes *Post, Mine, Repeat* so unique and of interest to a range of readers who want to see beyond the headlines to understand the bigger picture of our newly datafied world. The author argues that to fully comprehend the place of data mining in our everyday lives, we need to 'differentiate types of data mining, actors engaged in such practices, institutional, and organisational contexts in which it takes place, and the range of purposes, intentions, and consequences of data mining' (Kennedy, 2016, p. 5). These rigorously researched areas of analysis make the book a crucial piece in a puzzle about current data relations.

Kennedy begins by explaining the book's focus on *social media* data mining rather than other forms, and her reasons are threefold: (1) because social media's logics are pervading everyday life (see van Dijck & Poell, 2013); (2) because its data are, at least in theory, accessible to a wider range of actors than other kinds. This is because people can interact with platforms' open Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) using third-party software, and (3) because ordinary people post meaningful and often intimate data to social media platforms, raising new questions about whether mining it should concern us. She then outlines some of the key debates about data mining's more extraordinary forms and proposes a new framework for imagining whether it 'can ever be undertaken in ways that are considered ethically acceptable, and that make a positive contribution to social life' (Kennedy, 2016, p. 43). This is the book's central normative question. Kennedy then situates her ideas firmly in the middle of the structure/agency dialectic, successfully weaving these perspectives into a convincing narrative about the possibilities for agency in the face of data power.

One of the strengths of the book's five empirical chapters is their attention to the diversity of data mining practices. Kennedy makes an important distinction between the motivations of different actors, asking:

Should we view a resource-poor public sector organisation like a museum or local council, which uses social media data mining in order to understand, engage and provide services for its publics, in the same way that we view the activities of the NSA, or Facebook's failure to distinguish private from public when it trades data assets with third parties? (2016, p. 8)

For the most part, Kennedy thinks not. She argues that social media data mining should not be understood as 'only problematic' (2016, p. 69, emphasis in original) given its diversity. For example, in Chapter Four she gives an example of an ordinary organisation 'doing good with data' (2016, p. 189)<sup>1</sup>. She explores how public sector organisations mine social media data to get a better understanding of public opinion, or to include voices that might otherwise be excluded. In Chapter Eight, she uses the examples of academic social media data mining and data activism to argue that, while they can be problematic, they 'serve to open up spaces for alternative and better (social media) data mining' (2016, p. 190). Yet she paints a more ethically complex picture in Chapter Five, showing how commercial social media insights companies make both moral and financial decisions when they mine data. Although most choose to access only publicly<sup>2</sup> available data because they think it is the morally 'right' thing to do, this is also because breaching platforms' terms of service – like creating a fake account and friending people to access their data – is not in their business interest. These examples teach readers about data mining's diversity and complexity, while encouraging them to consider the possibility of doing good with data.

Researchers from Sociology and related fields have not yet asked how ordinary social media users *feel* about what happens to their data. This question is gaining importance as we produce more and more of it, and in light of data mining's 'becoming-ordinary' (2016, p. 81). *Post, Mine, Repeat* partly attends to this absence, and in Chapter Seven Kennedy reports on focus groups conducted with 65 demographically diverse social media users. Here again, respondents were concerned with the variety of data mining practices: the 'type of data gathered', 'from whom', and 'for what purpose' the data were mined (2016, p. 162). The book sets the agenda for Kennedy's and other future research into users' perspectives, as these insights inform thinking about what should concern us about social media data mining. The methods used in the projects that make up *Post, Mine, Repeat* offer valuable lessons to scholars wanting to glean similar knowledge about the life of data on the ground, or 'from the bottom up', to borrow from Coudry and Powell (2014). This is an empirically rich and detailed project, to such an extent that this short review inevitably misses some important things.

In the ninth and concluding chapter, the author develops a new framework for understanding the role of metrics in new data assemblages. Her approach combines Porter's (1995) ideas about 'the trust that numbers inspire because of their apparent objectivity and facticity', and Grosser's (2014) more recent arguments about the 'metrification of social life' (2016, p. 11) on social media platforms that produce a hunger for even *more* numbers. More likes, more followers, more retweets, more shares. She argues that talking about a desire for numbers rather than a trust in numbers highlights the contradictions that accompany ordinary social media data mining, such as a 'hunger for data and statistics [...] *despite* knowledge about their inaccuracy and unreliability, *despite* distrust' (2016, p. 224, emphases in original). To give an example of this trust/distrust contradiction, in Chapter Five Kennedy explains that the accuracy of data was 'irrelevant' (2016, p. 224) to the clients of some intermediary insights firms. Her respondents expressed a satisfaction with and desire for

numbers even though there were inaccurate. Although Kennedy deliberately moves away from high-profile examples, her framework's commitment to the tensions between a simultaneous trust *and* distrust of numbers will be useful at a time when, to quote two conflicting *Guardian* newspaper articles, numbers could provide 'an essential public service' (Pullinger, 2017) but might also have 'lost their power' (Davies, 2017) in what has been dubbed a 'post-truth' political climate.

There are many articles, apps, and anecdotes that point to the abundance of data in our lives: the 'data delirium', to borrow from van Zoonen (2014). This makes it easy to dismiss social media data mining as a growing concern rather than a practice that might sometimes be harnessed for acceptable, fair, and ethical reasons. But Kennedy presents a measured perspective as this practice becomes ordinary, and it is partly for this reason that *Post, Mine, Repeat* received an honourable mention for the Association of Internet Researchers' (AoIR) 2017 Nancy Baym Book Award. The book unites concerns of interest to many *Information, Communication and Society* readers, including: social media data mining, (big) data and data relations, privacy and surveillance, and a desire for metrics and numbers. Exceptionally well written, the book is suitable for undergraduate and postgraduate students who are interested in social media and society, (big) data and data power, and digital cultures more generally. Beyond academia, Chapters One and Two are accessible to those interested in understanding what happens to social media data, and why this might (or might not) matter. The approach developed in Chapter Nine is also relevant for those thinking about the changing role of metrics in current political and related climates. *Post, Mine, Repeat* covers a breadth of topics and research but without losing its focus on the new data relations that emerge as social media data mining becomes ordinary: as we post, mine, and repeat.

## Notes

1. This term is an adaptation of US data visualisation agency Periscope's strapline: 'do good with data' (see [www.periscopic.com](http://www.periscopic.com)).
2. As Kennedy notes, the public/private divide is 'ambiguous' (2016, p.125), and she cites Nissenbaum (2009) and boyd (2014) to unpack it.

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