Collaborative Research in the Datafied Society

by Mirko Tobias Schäfer, Karin van Es and Tracey P. Lauriault (eds.) (2024) Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 306 pp.

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Collaborative Research in the Datafied Society proposes an urgent reorientation of both scholarly practice and academic imagination. It is not a catalogue of techniques or a fashionable plea for "engagement"; it compels readers to reckon with what it means to do research with and through others, in contexts where data is not merely a topic but the medium of social and institutional life.

What distinguishes the book is its refusal to treat "collaboration" as a managerial fix, bureaucratic imposition, or neutral method. Instead, collaboration is framed as a profound epistemological and political pivot – a way of resisting the fragmentation of knowledge, the isolation of disciplinary expertise, and academia's self-referential enclosures. The book urges research that is dialogic, open to outside voices, and socially engaged. It repositions the researcher from distant observer or "expert" to engaged interlocutor and co-producer of knowledge, weaving research with practices across public, civic, and technical domains. Collaboration thereby becomes a working space where power, justice, care, and responsibility intersect.

This shift is not merely procedural; it challenges foundational academic assumptions and demands humility (Jasanoff 2003) – a willingness to cede authority, question "excellence" metrics, and engage in collectively negotiated and provisional problems, outcomes, and ownership. In this way, *Collaborative Research in the Datafied Society* situates itself as both a critical contribution and a call for new forms of scholarly responsibility. The book resonates with STS critiques of scientific authority (Haraway 1988) and recent calls in critical data studies for care and co-production (D'Ignazio and Klein 2020), while insisting that, in a world whose infrastructures are increasingly algorithmic, dynamic, and contested, such scholarly responsibility is not optional but urgent.

A first transversal theme is the centrality of power, with accountability built into the politics of knowledge production. The book follows how claims are negotiated, disputed, and made actionable in data-saturated settings, and it keeps asking whose interests data work serves. This extends long-running STS debates on expertise, publics, and participation – from expert-lay relations (Collins and Evans 2002) to democratising science (Guston 2004; Fischer 2009) and concerns about asymmetries in ostensibly "open" science (Fox et al. 2021). Contributors

show how collaborative projects navigate – and at times reconfigure – uneven distributions of resources, tools, and decision rights across institutional positions and social locations.

Here, the book's reflexivity is especially valuable: rather than romanticising collaboration, contributors foreground the conflicts, frictions, and failures that frequently arise: the challenge of transforming "insider" access into genuinely transformative outcomes (Chapter 2 "Performing Critical Data Studies from the Inside" by Rob Kitchin), tensions between academic and activist priorities, the difficulties of maintaining "reflexive neutrality" (Chapter 3 "Confronting Politicized Research" by René König, Payal Arora and Usha Raman), the complexities of addressing diverse subjectivities in participatory research (Chapter 6 "The Challenge of Addressing Subjectivities through Participatory Action Research on Datafication" by Katherine Reilly and Maria Julia Morales), the practical challenges of coordinating diverse stakeholders across government departments with different mandates and resources (Chapter 7 "Community Responses to Family Violence Policy" by Anthony McCosker, Jane Farmer, and Arezou Soltani Panah), or the risk of researcher "assimilation" that can compromise critical distance (Chapter 15 "You Will Be Assimilated" by Daan Kolkman). These narratives expose the double bind of collaboration in the datafied society: it is necessary, but never easy; indispensable, but always contingent.

A second transversal theme is the commitment to situated knowledge. The book resists universalizing claims, foregrounding instead the partiality and context-dependency of research, especially those entangled in messy, real-world settings. Projects such as "Data Against Feminicide" (Chapter 8 "Data Against Feminicide" by Helena Suárez Val, Catherine D'Ignazio and Silvana Fumega) – where Latin American activists and feminist data scientists co-design digital tools to document and make visible systemic violence – or the "Fairwork Project" tackling exploitative platform labour (Chapter 9 "The Fairwork Project" by Tatiana López, Funda Ustek-Spilda, Patrick Feuerstein, Fabian Ferrari and Mark Graham), ground the book's theorizing in thick, situated practices. Through initiatives like the "DataWorkplace" (Chapter 14 "The DataWorkplace" by Krista Ettlinger, Mirko Tobias Schäfer, Albert Meijer and Martiene Branderhorst) where researchers, local governments, and civil servants negotiate data literacy and institutional change, the book models what it means to "stay with the trouble", to borrow Donna Haraway's phrase (2016), refusing easy abstraction or closure.

This orientation aligns the volume with the traditions of feminist STS and participatory action research, even as it innovates by demonstrating how such commitments must be reworked for the age of platform capitalism and algorithmic governance. The recurring language of "data work", "co-design", and related notions forms a living vocabulary for contemporary collaborative inquiry. The book's chapters collectively push back against the temptations of solutionism and universalism, arguing instead for research grounded in real, often fraught, relationships.

One of the book's most provocative insights concerns the transformation not just of research practice, but of the university itself. The editors and several contributors are blunt in their critique: universities remain structurally misaligned with the demands of collaborative, socially engaged, and interdisciplinary research. As the editors argue in their opening chapter, traditional academic incentives primarily benefit individual researchers and fail to recognize the challenging work of building networks, engaging in interdisciplinary collaboration, or developing innovative educational formats for practitioners (Chapter 1 "Making a Difference"

by Mirko Tobias Schäfer, Karin van Es and Tracey P. Lauriault). Reward systems still privilege publications and grants over co-produced datasets, relationship-building, or innovative applied research (Chapter 5 "Open Government Partnership" by Mary Francoli and Daniel J. Paré). Support structures are often ill-equipped for the administrative and legal complexity of cross-sectoral partnerships. The entrepreneurial research approach (Chapter 4 "Inside Datafication" by Mirko Tobias Schäfer) reveals a double edge for collaboration. It widens networks through privileged access and co-created work, while also overloading them with time, integrity, and recognition challenges that effectively split the researcher's role in two; signs of institutional openness exist, yet reforms are still patchy.

Perhaps the book's greatest strength – and what sets it apart from less critically engaged calls for "co-design" or "transdisciplinarity" – is its candor about failure, ambiguity, and incompleteness. There is a consistent acknowledgment that collaboration does not automatically dissolve inequalities of expertise, resources, or recognition; nor does it guarantee that marginalized voices will be genuinely empowered in the process. Several contributors recount projects that did not fully succeed or exposed new dilemmas, such as Chapter 13 "Speculative Data Infrastructures" by Jonathan W. Y. Gray, where collective learning sometimes stumbles on institutional resistance or data opacity. The persistent theme of "unacknowledged labor" (Chapter 1 "Making a Difference" by Mirko Tobias Schäfer, Karin van Es and Tracey P. Lauriault) – the emotional, logistical, and relational work that sustains collaboration, often invisibilized by academic metrics – recurs in essays and empirical cases alike.

Yet, by maintaining this reflexive, self-critical mode, the book models the very collaborative ethos it advocates. The question is not simply how to do collaborative research in the datafied society, but whether the structures and cultures of knowledge production can be meaningfully reshaped to support it. The editors and contributors do not claim to have settled this question; instead, they invite the field to continue experimenting, reflecting, and pushing against institutional inertia. In so doing, the book situates itself not as a final word but as a node in an ongoing, necessarily collective process of learning and reconfiguration.

For all its richness, *Collaborative Research in the Datafied Society* sometimes left this reader wanting more – perhaps because it succeeds so well at raising the stakes and outlining the terrain. The book makes meaningful efforts to include cases from different regions to the world, including significant cases from Latin America (Chapter 8 "Data Against Feminicide" by Helena Suárez Val, Catherine D'Ignazio and Silvana Fumega), Brazil (Chapter 12 "Empowering Citizenship Through Academic Practices" by Acilon H. Baptista Cavalcante and Ana Claudia Duarte Cardoso), and explores transnational contexts spanning multiple countries including South Africa (for example, Chapter 9 "The Fairwork Project" by Tatiana López, Funda Ustek-Spilda, Patrick Feuerstein, Fabian Ferrari and Mark Graham). However, the empirical heart of the volume – featuring Irish government partnerships (Chapter 2 "Performing Critical Data Studies from the Inside" by Rob Kitchin), the Utrecht Data School (Chapter 4 "Inside Datafication" by Mirko Tobias Schäfer), Equity Ottawa (Chapter 10 "Advancing Equity through Data Practices" by Muna Osman and Hindia Mohamoud), the eQuality Project in Canada (Chapter 16 "Lessons Learned from The eQuality Project" by Valerie Steeves) and similar settings – tends to rest on the infrastructures and resources of the Global North.

That said, the inclusion of chapters centered on the Global South or transnational labor solidarity is more than tokenistic. These contributions powerfully illustrate how collaborative research can be mobilized to contest systemic violence, empower marginalized communities, and experiment with alternative data futures. They enrich the book and point to a horizon where such work might expand even further: toward more resource-constrained, politically unstable, or highly surveilled environments – settings where both the stakes and the risks of collaboration are amplified. A future volume could take up this challenge even more centrally, foregrounding voices and experiments from the Global South or "peripheries" of datafication.

Similarly, the institutional critique, while clear-eyed, sometimes stops short of imagining what truly radical reorganization would require. What would it mean to design university structures that reward not only publication and grants, but also care, patience, listening, and collective risk-taking? How can collaborative research avoid being absorbed by "impact" agendas that prioritize metrics over meaning? These are questions the book raises but cannot fully resolve – perhaps because they demand ongoing, collective experimentation. One might also wish for an even more sustained engagement with the emotional and affective dimensions of collaboration: the disappointments, exhaustion, and joys that shape such scholarship, and the transformative encounters that academic prose often leaves in the background. In this sense, the book points to the limits of what a single volume can capture about the lived realities of collaborative research in an era defined by uncertainty.

Collaborative Research in the Datafied Society is not a handbook of best practices; it is a reflexive, hopeful manifesto for research in a digital, datafied world. By foregrounding collaboration's politics, the democratisation of expertise, the centrality of situated data work, and the need for institutional transformation, the volume sets a benchmark for engaged scholarship. Its contributions are concrete and portable across settings – a methodological repertoire for co-design and reflexive neutrality; practical guidance for building partnerships that acknowledge unequal capacities and still deliver shared outcomes; pedagogical tools for critical data literacy that travel from classrooms to city halls; and an infrastructural sensibility that treats datasets, protocols, and interfaces as sites of accountability rather than neutral pipes. For researchers, practitioners, and students, the book is both an invitation and a challenge to build work that is exacting and humble, inclusive and attentive to power, oriented toward justice and capable of institutional change. The experiment is not finished; the most vital questions – about knowledge, power, and justice – remain open, which is precisely why this volume deserves to be read, debated, and enacted.

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