



Data: What are they? What do they do?

The notion of data has been traced back to the 1640s (Kitchin 2014) and for long it has lived a rather unspectacular life. This changed in the mid-20th century when the term became related to computing technology and synonymous with large scale “data processing”. Thereby the term and data practices as well became both more valued and more controversial. Data have come to be increasingly associated with numeracy and computing, and anthropologists have often rejected the term for being reductionist. We acknowledge that data may be all kinds of traces of practices and phenomena, and we are curious about how the current turn to digital data will intervene in data relations; in valuable or destructive ways.

Last term our journey towards shaping *experimentalist data studies* started out with discussions of experimentalism and its relation to data. We examined experiments in various contexts, viewing them as situations that are organised to facilitate the production of knowledge through experiences emerging from the encounter of differences (cf. Bogusz 2018). People experience everyday lives and their phenomena by way of a variety of different techniques, terms and relations - and increasingly also by way of data. It is the ethnographer’s ethos to take advantage of this heterogeneity, rather than attempting to reduce knowledge production to a single type of material or single method. How does ethnography integrate data in its knowledge production? Can data be organised to generate “differences in experience”?

The point of departure for our exploration of data during the summer term 2021 is the widespread understanding in Science & Technology Studies of data as *relational* (e.g. Vertesi & Ribes 2019). This means that we aim to discuss data in their situated embedding in tables, books, libraries, organisations, conversations, everyday practices, exercises, emotions and so forth (cf. Loukissas 2018). Data have agencies, consequences, effects and abilities to create relations and to circulate (cf. Leonelli 2016). How do data intervene into human relations? When do they work as boundary objects and bring different people and practices together? When do they discriminate and excerpt power? When do they emancipate and empower? As Leigh Star (1999) taught us, we also need to approach the sites silenced by data and excluded from engagements with data: What are data in poetry interpretation, or in everyday discussions at tea time? Who are granted the right to determine what counts as data? And data themselves: are they strong or fragile? Can data break down? How are data curated and cared for?

We invite speakers and discussants, friends and visitors of the RUSTlab to join us in discussing some of these and other questions in our RUSTlab Lectures over the summer term 2021. Our discussions always rely on original empirical research, and will discuss data as they figure in the fields of E-Health literacy, citizen science, anthropological research, and Covid-19 tracing.

References:

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