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"Cutting through the Clutter" and Other Big Data Promises: A Review of Mark Andrejevic's "Infoglut"

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Abstract: This article is a review of Mark Andrejevic's (2013) book "Infoglut".

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'Big data' refers to vast computational power and staggering quantities of information. These attributes are accompanied by cultural elements that envision how this information can be exploited. It is unclear whether we are witnessing a large-scale re-ordering of society, or simply another attempt to sell a new technology. What is clear is that attempts to cope with big data touch upon longstanding debates over information access and power, but also of critique, expertise and truth. As Faltesek (2013, 403) notes, big data serves as "a brand name for a conception of the relationship between society, technology, and politics".

Mark Andrejevic's *Infoglut* is a valuable and timely contribution to this topic. It addresses contemporary efforts to know the social world through big data, as well as other ways of interpreting information. The book focuses on a supposed shift toward big data, and all the socio-technical and cultural attempts to make this shift meaningful and profitable. Andrejevic takes a tentative approach to big data, noting "[i]f it is, indeed, the case that a growing number of people, from intelligence analysts to citizens, are facing the prospect of unprecedented access to mediated forms of information, then it is worth exploring the ways in which people are adjusting to a changing understanding of how information is treated in a data-saturated world" (4). Regardless of the novelty of big data, it seems clear that it will bear consequences for the segmentation and sorting of the social world, as well as the role of knowledge and facts in such endeavours. *Infoglut* covers a set of social phenomenon, providing both a close reading of each individual case and broader impression of the media culture in which these new technologies and sales pitches are located. As with Andrejevic's earlier works, *Infoglut* benefits from a coherent multi-site analysis that is seamlessly mixed with an informed understanding of critical cultural studies and philosophy.

As a general condition, widespread access to an abundance of information forces a reconsideration of available strategies for information collection, processing and dissemination. Power is no longer strictly linked to access and control of accurate information. The thrust of this book runs contrary to the belief that social actors react to these conditions through paralysis, or information overload. Rather, there is a renewed effort to "cut through the clutter", a statement that is repeated throughout the book. Attempts at informational efficiency come at a cost, and Andrejevic notes that contemporary efforts tout prediction over explanation, and correlation instead of causation. Governments and corporations may also actively fuel the glut when propagating multiple contradictory accounts of an event. They also fuel the mediascape with a kind of conservative deconstruction whereby facts are aggressively devalued through affect-based debunking, and fact-checkers are denigrated, yet ubiquitous.

The reader is presented with a set of loosely assembled case studies. Through these cases, Andrejevic identifies as a common thread attempts "to find a shortcut that bypasses the need to comprehend proliferating narrative or referential representations, whether these

are in the form of descriptive data, first person accounts, or expert analysis" (4). These cases are unified not only in their attempt at sense-making in a context of overflowing data, but also in their ambition to "bypass the contrived character of representation" (5), as well as bypassing any concern with comprehension, discourse or narrative. Andrejevic also observes an increased prominence of simulation as knowledge production, but also reality production. For example, prediction markets are not only a shift from public deliberation to gambling-as-policymaking, but also from "what *should* happen to what *will* happen" (73, emphasis in original). By betting on the most plausible outcome of a policy decision, the simulated future, de-politicized through its origins in 'the market', is privileged as an inevitable outcome.

Another prominent theme is the asymmetry between those who can afford tools to exploit the glut, and those lacking access. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 consider how markets and security agencies may take advantage of tools such as predictive analytics and sentiment analysis. Chapters 5 and 6 focus on recent attempts to read the body and mind, respectively. Andrejevic frames the latter two as strategies for those under conditions of information austerity. This access gap is a growing concern with the expansion of big data, notably when public resources such as libraries and censuses are targeted for their supposed technological obso-lescence and financial untenability. The companies selling these techniques present mind- and body-reading as providing unmediated access to targeted knowledge, on the cheap.

One of the prominent theoretical concerns is the demise of symbolic efficiency. Drawing from Žižek, this refers to the supposed crisis of representation, and a waning tolerance for the space between the symbol and what it defines. Attempts to bear meaning or carry some kind of representation are suspect, and may be attacked in order to 'get at the truth'. In a more general sense, this is connected to the "demise of the power of narrative, deliberation, and explanation" (95), and "the displacement of representation by correlation" (50). Any sin-gle account is not only suspect, but also lost among a deluge of contradictory information. For this reason, there is a renewed desire to access the truth through novel means. The de-mise of symbolic efficiency is linked to a strain of populism frequently (but not exclusively) employed by Republican politicians and right-wing news outlets in the United States. It amounts to an interpretation of post-modernism where affect and gut instinct is privileged over diligent research. This scepticism seems empowering because it is flaunted as a cri-tique of expertise. Yet any sense of empowerment is dampened when focusing on examples like affective marketing, where affect is solicited and processed in the absence of an actual community, something Andrejevic dubs "aggregation without collectivization" (65). Populism and critique form a conservative use of postmodernism, as it can be used consistently to reinforce a status quo.

This theme clearly extends from Andrejevic's earlier work on media cultures, specifically invocations of a savvy scepticism among audiences (2004). In these examples, it evinces an obsession with power of the image, and the claim that all truths are constructed. This nega-tion of fact is coupled with a mobilization of affective intensities in order to compensate for waning belief. In a media culture championed by Fox News, facts are framed as an elitist attack. Media corporations supplement their control over information flows through affective facts. Here, Andrejevic, drawing from Massumi, notes that "power relies not on the attempt to control and monopolize the realm of empirical facts, but upon channelling this tautological logic: monitoring and modulating the ambient feeling tone that endows non-facts with their 'truthiness'" (47).

The penultimate chapter considers the logical extent of this demise, as it leads to collapse of critique into conspiracy theory. Andrejevic notes that "[a] landscape in which the sheer volume of available information highlights the impasse of representation – not just the difficul-ty of gaining a complete picture, but the apparent failure of those systems that were sup-posed to help us adjudicate between rival accounts – provides fertile ground for the rehabili-tation and reconfiguration of conspiracy theory" (114). Big data, but also a seemingly endless array of websites, fact-checkers and twenty-four hour news channels, fuels a rigid refutation of research and evidence. Here, *Infoglut* illuminates neo-conservative cultural tendencies by making sense of Fox News' attacks against progressive critique. Andrejevic provides a close reading Glenn Beck's media career as indicative of a mainstreaming of conspiracy theory.

This amounts to an insightful (if discouraging) account of a media and political culture that can arguably be generalized beyond the United States.

However, the media culture Andrejevic describes is not simply a matter of nihilistic de-bunking. This apparent faithlessness is coupled with a renewed faith in computational power and algorithms, as well as the legibility of the market (chapter 4), the body (chapter 5), the brain (chapter 6). As such, the "very attempt to *privilege* the post-referential modality of cor-relation and affect constitutes a re-inscription of what it promises to surpass" (140, emphasis in original). Narrative accounts are dismissed as biased, yet they are succeeded by truth-technologies whose proliferation is embedded with such accounts. Andrejevic's concern with the critique of symbolic efficiency demonstrates that such knowledge practices "conserve the symbolic logics the claim to surpass" (18). With this in mind, *Infoglut* concludes by endorsing a critical approach to studying these conditions, in order to "reimagine infrastructural ar-rangements, but also the knowledge practices with which they are associated."

Knowledge practices through big data amount to a "reversal of the relationship between targeting and comprehensive surveillance" (36). Put simply, monitor first and find correlations later. Identifying this attitude is helpful in the context of PRISM and other large-scale surveil-lance programmes, even if Andrejevic does not address this topic directly. Instead of concen-trating on technical capabilities, *Infoglut* focuses on the logic fuelling these initiatives, and the underlying tensions that are otherwise obscured by current discussion.

References

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