Archaeology of the Datanthropocene

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Some time ago, David Berry introduced the term 'infrasomatization' (Berry 2016) which he defines as the production of constitutive infrastructures; specifically the way that digital algorithms are deployed and change existing infrastructures, and how they alter rationalities by introducing computational interdependencies and structural brittleness into our systems (Berry 2018). In the process, he has just coined another new term: the *Datanthropocene*, the data-intensive society. This is closely linked to 'big data' approaches, data-intensive science, and he suggests that it "creates new economic structures but also new social realities and data-intensive subjectivities and hence new problems for society to negotiate".

Of course, debates continue about the Anthropocene, not least whether or not it can even be defined as a specific epoch – does it start with the atomic era, for instance, or maybe even with the introduction of agriculture, or is it primarily associated with human-created climate change, pollution and extinctions?

Like the Anthropocene, whether or not the Datanthropocene can be classified as an epoch is unclear, although since we are apparently at the beginning of the Fourth Industrial Revolution or the Second Machine Age, we are arguably engaged in something radically new and transformational. Regardless, there is little doubt the Datanthropocene is something that is created by humans – for instance, we can point to the changes wrought by the development of social networks, the exponential growth in the production and availability of data, the launch of the iPhone and subsequent essentiality of the computer in the pocket, the development of machine learning technologies and their increasing application to a wide range of areas, and so on. David Berry points to the materiality of the digital infrastructures as well as the cognitive infrastructures: "brain-interfaces, conversational interfaces, implants, and algorithmic user interfaces that constantly reshape themselves based on their monitoring and processing of the user space and their practices"

(Berry 2018). This opens the door and at the same time presents a challenge for an archaeology of the Datanthropocene.

To some extent, this is not new. For example, Jennifer Gabrys points to The Dead Media Manifesto written by Bruce Sterling and Richard Kadrey in 1995 which argues for the need to undertake a palaeontological examination of dead media, "accounting for the extinctions and sedimentations of lost media technologies" (Gabrys 2011, viii). The Dead Media Project took off as a mailing list which ultimately itself died around 2001 and is now archived.

The idea behind the Dead Media Project hasn't died, though. It lives on in the field of media archaeology which frequently examines digital things – for instance, the 2015 issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology* on Media Archaeology includes papers on digital cultural artefacts (Bollmer 2015), the archaeology of electrical waste (Taffel 2015), the excavation of the 'Atari Burial Ground' (Reinhard 2015), and the excavation of a hard disk drive (Perry and Morgan 2015). Similarly, Adrian Maldonado's *Almost Archaeology* blog and associated Twitter feed frequently refers to digital technology in its coverage of archaeology and pop culture (such as the archaeology of the MP3 (2016)). It's even been the subject of a recent tweet from the author Neil Gaiman:

> If you were an archaeologist who found some CDs, how easily or practically could you make something to extract and decode the data on them? https://t.co/fP2zwltY6b
>
> — Neil Gaiman (@neilhimself) September 23, 2018

This sparked a subsequent discussion, including a contribution by Adrian Maldonado:

> Seems it'd be a lot of effort to unlock the secrets of a billion AOL installers and Windows 95 boot discs https://t.co/qSkwLmyhNI
>
> — Almost Archaeology (@AlmostArch) September 23, 2018

and more seriously,

> Inspired by a recent discussion of media archaeology on Twitter, here follows a short list of ongoing efforts to avoid a Digital Dark Age [thread]
>
> — Almost Archaeology (@AlmostArch) September 23, 2018

Much of this discussion is about the standard archaeological obsession, rubbish – the whole variety and abundance of electronic wastes that may in the future come to stand for much of what ultimately was the Datanthropocene. But this stuff is far more than just rubbish. Jennifer Gabrys

follows William Rathje in suggesting that "a dump is not just about waste, it is also about understanding our cultural and material metabolism. A dump registers the speed and voracity of consumption, the transience of objects and our relation with them, and the enduring materiality of those objects." (2011, 17). She writes about the development of a 'garbage imaginary':

> "A garbage imaginary might emerge not just by seeing the matter of things, the fields through which they circulate, and their modes of transformation and animation … it may be possible to begin to address how matter transforms and to draw out the moments and movements where energies, resources, values, temporalities, and spaces shift." (2011, 156).

This speaks very clearly to an archaeology of the Datanthropocene and emphasises – as does David Berry – that this goes beyond the material to the immaterial, effectively a cognitive digital archaeology (Huggett 2017) as well as a physical digital archaeology. So a digital archaeology of the Datanthropocene has to be about more than simply the physical devices we use, more than about the digital artefacts we create with them, but also about the culture we create around them – how these devices alter our practices, affect our thought, and impact on our understanding of the past, however near that past might be.

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