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The Knowledge Imperative in Academic Waste(lands)

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The Knowledge Imperative in Academic Waste(lands)

Ryan Evely Gildersleeve

Abstract

In this article, I use data as a vehicle to investigate waste/value in academia provides unique opportunities to draw inferences about the affective consequences and material effects of data for the knowledge imperative of academia. I take higher education's role as the arbiter, producer, and disseminator of academic knowledge to be my central concern in this article. I review various spaces through which academic data are produced. These will include research data, teaching data, administrative data, and what I call "wild data." I explore how campus climate surveys produce data waste and also how such waste has potential to become "wild" through perversions of their use by academic and non-academic entities alike. The transgression from administrative data to data waste to wild data becomes an assemblage of value-building for the knowledge imperative of academe.

Introduction

Data. Data. Data. Data. Data. Data. Data. Data. Data. Data. Data. Data. Data. Data. Data.
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Academics produce data. Academics analyze data. Academics use data. Academic administrators manage data. Academic leaders make data-driven decisions. Academia has a surplus of data. Academia wastes data. Academia values data.

The data in Academia produces waste.

The data in Academia produces value.

Academia thrives on data.

Using data as a vehicle to investigate waste/value in academia provides unique opportunities to draw inferences about the affective consequences and material effects of data for the knowledge imperative of academia. Within this paper, I will review the various spaces through which data emerge as things done/produced by academia. These will include research data, teaching data, administrative data, and what I call “wild data.”

I orient my analyses around two questions:

What comes from data waste in academia?

How does data waste reveal [produce] value in relation to academia’s knowledge imperative?

Object-Oriented Ontology

In this paper, I draw on object-oriented ontology (OOO) (Bryant, 2011; Harman, 2018) to theorize the affect of waste and the project of value in academia, as exemplified by data. Object Oriented Ontology is a school of philosophy that produces a *flat ethics* wherein all objects are given equal attention. It has been developed most deeply by Graham Harman (2018), Timothy Morton (2016), and Levi Bryant (2011), with kindred philosophy generated by Jane Bennett (2010) and Tristan Garcia (2016). That is, humans, non-humans, natural, cultural, sentient, real, or fictional are all weighted the same in analysis. While treated equally, this does not mean they are not in tensional relationships with and across one another. Indeed, the tension between, betwixt, and across objects is what produces change in the world. There are both real and sensual objects, but humans can only come to know objects through their affects—the sensual relations between them. Put another way, we never really know the absolute truth of any given real object. But that does not mean they do not exist. Applying OOO to my study of academic waste/value via data seems appropriate in that I seek to understand the affect of data (an object) in relationship to the knowledge imperative of academe (another object), inclusive of the affective relations generated in tension with human beings in academia (both also objects).

The Knowledge Imperative

As I have concerned myself previously (Gildersleeve, 2016), the knowledge imperative is that social contract between colleges and universities and society that promised to safeguard knowledge—as an organizing system of social life—from partisanship, political whim, and undue influence from powerful factions. The knowledge imperative is the emancipatory role that Academe assumed when it fought for and secured academic freedom in the United States (American Association of University Professors [AAUP], 1940). Put simply, I take higher education's role as the arbiter, producer, and disseminator of academic knowledge to be my central concern in this article.

Faculties usually express the knowledge imperative through research and creative activities, teaching and learning activities, and service and outreach activities. These are the three versions of academic knowledge protected by academic freedom. They are the bedrock of the social contract between colleges and universities and the broader society they serve, build, and rely upon. Each expression of the knowledge imperative generates its own kind of data, which I will address further below. Suffice to share now that the knowledge imperative is data rich, data driven, and data wasteful.

The knowledge imperative also gives rise to knowledge workers—those who shepherd the university's responsibility. Knowledge workers form a class of laborers and include direct knowledge producers as well as knowledge supporters and facilitators. In this way, everyone who works on a university campus can become a knowledge worker. For example, custodians are responsible for cleaning and maintaining the physical conditions of campus that support knowledge production, while administrators are responsible for facilitating the bureaucratic infrastructure to facilitate knowledge production. Students and faculty might most often most directly engage in knowledge production together in classroom teaching and learning activities. Everyone across the university plays a role in the knowledge imperative, which will become increasingly relevant later in my analysis of data waste and the production of value in academe.

Academic Data

Research data are those data that emerge from research activities, such as biology experiments or sociological studies of immigration. Teaching data are those data generated through teaching activities, such as grades. Research and teaching data are fundamental to the knowledge imperative of academe. They are knowledge-building data. Whereas administrative data are generated through information collected about the the work of the institution, such as faculty productivity reports. Administrative data do not emerge to further the knowledge imperative. They are not knowledge-building. Rather, administrative data are flows of academic data designed for economic purposes. They govern the economy of the university—flows of knowledge-building activity and the conditions through which it might occur.

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Administrative data seek to find efficiencies and returns on investment from society (e.g., taxpayers, donors, trustees, etc.) in the institution.

“Wild data” are those data that do not fit strictly into research, teaching, or administrative categories. Rather, wild data are data waste that transgress the borders that circulate administrative vs. knowledge-building data.

My further analyses answering the question, “What comes from data waste in academia?” will focus primarily on the last two kinds of data: administrative data and wild data, with a particular interest in the wild. I ground my analysis in a data trope commonly found on university campuses today: the campus climate surveys regime. I explore how campus climate surveys produce data waste and also how such waste has potential to become “wild” through perversions of their use by academic and non-academic entities alike. The transgression from administrative data to data waste to wild data becomes an assemblage of value-building for the knowledge imperative of academe. Before turning directly to administrative and wild data, I want to share a conceptualization of data waste.

Data Waste

In contemporary social science, “Big Data” is a big deal. Big Data are large-scale datasets that capture the seemingly mundane utterances of daily activity. Things like:

How many people use a crosswalk? (At precisely what time, in what direction, and literally *every* person.)

Where and when do people click a button on an online course management software? (And, like, *every* click.)

How many times is the library door opened and closed in the course of a week? (And the frequency distributions across other—*any* other—timescales.)

Simultaneously, a culture of data-driven assessment has swept across higher education. For example, it is common for student affairs program staff to gather as much information as possible about services provided to students. These information might include information about the services themselves (e.g., number of personnel hours committed, budget/cost, student satisfaction with the services, provider background characteristics) as well as information about the students participating in the services (e.g., GPA, racial/ethnic demographics, program of study, number of credit hours taken).

At one campus with which I am familiar, students sign in with an identification number for virtually any formal service they might seek, such as attending a supplemental instruction session for a lower-division engineering course. That ID number then is connected via other campus databases to a student’s background characteristics, including where they live. If the student lives on campus, it might even be used to note how many times they accessed the shared community room

in their campus residence hall, the library, or ate in the cafeteria. The point is that seemingly unlimited data are generated about and in relationship to a student participating in supplemental instruction. The service (i.e., supplemental instruction) becomes a node or circuit junction that circulates student data with service-provider data in order to offer up potential assessment opportunities. Such assessments might target the service itself, as well as the student's trajectory on campus. These are the known and foreseen uses of such data generative practices common on university campuses today.

Both big data and the sweeping assessment regime are enabled by the becoming-technology condition of modern academia. That is to say, innovations in technology make it easier and more accessible to generate, store, (re)organize, combine, and manipulate data than ever. So much so that universities invest an ever-increasing amount of their budgets for data infrastructure. And yet, the services provided on most campuses have not changed dramatically over time. The administrative arm of the institution continues to grow, but does not necessarily change the *modus operandi* of supporting campus life. Despite the technological and methodological gains made in data science and program assessment, the simple fact that data can be collected does not necessarily make them useful. Thus, data waste becomes the normative condition of knowledge workers.

To put it another way, knowledge workers are swimming in data. Whether from big data regimes capturing our mundane movement through campus or programmatic assessment regimes circulating disparate activities through a circuit junction to produce new data, there seem to be an abundance of data everywhere on campus. In this ubiquity, plenty of data become unused, chucked, disregarded, or forgotten—even if stored permanently, digitally. They become waste. Data waste.

Wild Data

Wild data traverse multiple categories or simply do not belong to any of the three readily recognized data sources. Data are wild in their becoming. That is, as data transform in use or affect, they shape-shift with unknown trajectories. These data are wild in their purposive transgression from administrative/knowledge-building data. Wild data become a value-building assemblage in how the data waste turns useful. That is to say, the use of data waste, the becoming-wild data, reveal what the university values. For what is more valuable than that which gets salvaged of waste and therefore born wild?

Next, I sketch a plausible trajectory for wild data born out of a hybrid administrative-knowledge-building data origin: the campus climate survey.

Campus Climate Surveys

It has become commonplace for U.S. universities to assess the attitudes, dispositions, and personal perceptions of students, faculty, and staff toward various

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dimensions of campus life. These surveys often rely on identity categories as tropes of lived experience and use likert scale models to measure established factors in creating inclusive campus communities. These surveys are often, but not exclusively, administered through divisions of student affairs or central institutional research offices. They commonly are outsourced to third-parties who specialize in developing campus climate survey tools, and they can be quite expensive depending on the assessment services provided by the purveyor.

Campus climate surveys generate a lot of data. Often administered longitudinally and campus-wide, a campus climate survey regime might generate hundreds of thousands of individual datum, and well beyond a million over a short period of time. And with every iteration of the survey, data waste is also produced. Increasingly, campus climate data also are gathered from normative administrative procedures that faculty, staff, and students encounter. These data can be generated through quick response-surveys built into online dashboards that university members might use for any number of mundane everyday activities, such as logging in to check on one's course registration appointment, checking one's paycheck, or searching for the university's policy on campus free speech. By embedding the creation of these data into the everyday, perhaps a more realistic picture of campus climate can be captured. It also makes response rates soar higher, creating ever more data, and ever more waste.

Data waste from the campus climate regime include at least two categories of data: non-normative and extra. Non-normative data are quite simply the outliers that do not fit within the normal distribution that most campus climate surveys seek to establish in statistical analyses. These data are chucked, tossed aside, and disregarded in most campus climate analyses. If data do not fit within the normal distribution, they become waste.

Extra data can come from three sources. One source of extra data are the data generated from survey items that go unused in analysis. For example, a climate survey might ask a question about student perceptions of peers' cultural awareness, yet analysts might never actually use those responses to inform a report on the campus climate. Another source of extra data are the data generated from incomplete surveys. In some cases, analysts might require factor analyses of multiple items from the survey in order to generate a finding about the climate. If a respondent did not complete all of these factor items, then their responses might not be counted at all. Yet, they were still generated. Finally, there are extra data generated in between thresholds of significance. That is to say, analysts might require a certain number of responses of a given item in order to establish a particular level of significance. Let's say that number is 100. That level of significance will not be strengthened until it reaches another particular number of responses; let's say 150. The fifty responses between 100-150 are extra, in relation to the significance of the analysis. The extra become data waste.

The non-normative and the extra data are all data waste. They are disregarded, ignored, and chucked aside. However, data waste are not dead. Indeed, data never die. And these academic data waste still may find life as wild data.

Ostensibly, the purpose of the campus climate survey is to provide a snapshot of how different groups experience various dimensions of campus life. Increasingly, these surveys can focus on cultural differences and how various campus constituents experience or perceive the university's aptitude for inclusion. The campus climate survey regime produces academic data in the form of administrative data for the support and facilitation of academic work. These administrative data include data waste in both non-normative and extra data. These data waste become wild data when circulated into new analyses, new purposes, and new uses apart from the snapshot of experience/perception of campus life.

New technologies make it easier than ever to combine data waste from one source with the data waste from another. For example, the wasted data from campus climate surveys might be combined with everyday data captured about recreation center use, or athletic event attendance, or registration rates for ethnic studies classes. These might lead to new or novel analyses that the original survey could not produce in and of itself. These analyses might then reveal deeper structural fissures in the cultural lives possibly operating on campus. The wastelands of data become rich resources for knowledge-building by and about the institution.

The extra data unusable in original analyses might be stored on a campus server, available for future inquiry. Later, an education researcher might seek these data for research purposes. A doctoral student might seek these data for a dissertation. A campus administrator might seek these data for a new assessment of student life resources. With so many data available, the desire to analyze, study, and generate newer and newer findings about the campus and its environs continues to multiply. These future/now analyses might be innocuous to the sources of data. They might simply lend greater insight into the experience of the university for various groups. These analyses might be useful for some groups whose interests are not represented—or made known—through the normative campus climate survey.

The transformation of data waste evokes the becoming-wild data into full throttle expulsion of the waste recirculated into academic data. The wild transformation from waste into academic data demonstrates how data are not allowed to waste for long, but rather must inevitably serve the institution's imperative. However, the institutional imperative is not necessarily supporting the knowledge imperative of academe. How might further analysis of other data wastes made wild demonstrate values more central or fundamental to the contemporary university? Next, I examine the waste produced from another administrative data source and a plausible wild trajectory that might not be as benign or progressive as the wild trajectory of the campus climate survey.

Faculty Productivity Reports

Another source of administrative data common to universities today is the faculty productivity report. I previously analysed these reports to demonstrate how data

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come to life in the neoliberal conditions of academe (Gildersleeve, 2016), but here my interest is more in the waste/value proposition of such data when they are made wild. Generally (and benevolently) speaking, faculty productivity reports ostensibly try to measure how much generative activity an individual faculty member achieved over a period of time. It usually includes information about things like a faculty members' number of publications, grants, courses taught, lectures given, awards received, etc. These are then used to make judgements on the faculty members' job performance and inform notions of a faculty member's merit.

However, these data can include everything from how many to a myriad of additional qualities of kind about each potential item. For example, not only how many journal articles, but which journals, their impact factors, how many citations for each journal article, and whether that article might be progenerative from or for external funding. These data might also inform a merit score for an individual faculty member. Ostensibly, this is why such data are collected in the first place, to make faculty evaluation more streamlined *and* more efficient. Yet, these sort of faculty productivity reports inevitably generate way more data than could conceivably ever be used in the increasingly rapid timescale of faculty evaluations produced by department chairs and deans. So, therefore, extra data are produced, then relegated as unused, as waste.

But simultaneously, these data can be aggregated by institutions themselves. Analyses created to compare units across campus, or with normative rates across competitive institutional types. This move might include identifying which units compete best with the institution's most competitive peers. Or, the movement of data might refine what merit means to move beyond quantity and into an amalgamation of quality, such as the average impact factor or sources of grant funding. Merit then goes on the move, in order to sustain the economy of knowledge production desired by the institution.

In such instance, data are made wild in their re-purposing, *and* new wild data are generated. The origin data of faculty productivity are made wild in the movement from individual to aggregate, while in that moment, the aggregate analyses generate new data on a different scale – institutional data from which a vast array of new decisions can be made. Decisions about resource investment to manage knowledge production might point administrators toward the most financially lucrative sources, potentially at the peril of some basic knowledge-building activities. As data traverse the institution from the faculty members' input to the department chair or dean's review, across campus to institutional comparisons, and back and forth and across and in between, new economies of knowledge production can be made visible, possible, plausible to those who control the ebb and flow of resource on campus.

However, in a flat ethics or OOO, we cannot esteem these data with any more nor any less significance than those of other objects. As such, these wild data are afforded a freedom of movement that can easily avoid deep contextualization when harnessed for economic decision-making by campus leaders. Recognizing such movements as the life of data in and out of the wastelands, should raise an

increasing awareness of how few questions are asked of data and the sea of data wastes in which modern academia swims.

Data Waste, Value, and the Knowledge Imperative of Academe

The recirculation of academic data raises myriad questions about academia's values, its value itself, and the consequences for the knowledge imperative. These are ethical questions. From a flat ethics perspective, do these data desire or deserve to be recirculated and made wild? Were they perhaps perfectly content to be chucked, disregarded? Data generally do not care; only in our affective relationship to them do we reimagine their purpose. That is to say, we seek to hear the data, what they want to tell us seems impressive to those who facilitate the becoming-wild data resurrecting the data waste into circulation with the knowledge imperative. Such relationship pushes the boundaries of the knowledge imperative as these data become the knowledge itself. If the knowledge imperative then is built upon wasteful, wasted, and wild data, in its facilitation, coordination, and production, what becomes of the knowledge generated by academia? In a sensual essence, knowledge comes from the wasteland.

While the examples of campus climate surveys and faculty productivity reports might not seem terribly high-stakes, the affective consequences of how data move, become wild, and repurposed from waste into use/value are nonetheless significant for further investigation and interrogation. This paper sought to explore what comes from data waste in academia, and in part, data waste has become what academia is built upon. The wastelands of data are what drive, run, and (re)organize our academic institutions with increasing rapidity and repetition. Examining the wild lives of academic data—the wastelands of academe—reveals that academia's knowledge imperative might be imperiled by the very thing that builds knowledge: data itself. For academia's modus operandus seems inextricably tied to its data waste, and salvage of such waste. Academia has become its wastelands, made possible by the wild lives of data produced through academic practice.

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