Book Review

Review of Taylor, Linnet, Gargi Sharma, Aaron Martin, and Shazade Jameson (eds.). 2020. *Data Justice and COVID-19: Global Perspectives*. London: Meatspace Press.

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*Data Justice and COVID-19: Global Perspectives*¹ is an undeniably impressive achievement. Organized, written, collated, and published in just a few months after the pandemic's first wave began, this edited collection contains twenty-eight case studies from around the world (Dispatches) and nine chapters that reflect on and summarize them (Commentaries). This ambitious scope affords a relatively holistic account of the variety of digital technologies deployed for COVID-19 response, focusing in particular on emerging digital technologies such as mobile phone-based contact tracing and exposure notification apps as well as other topics including the impacts of misinformation in traditional and social media and the ways in which big infrastructural platforms such as Google, Amazon, and Facebook have emerged as core pandemic players. In doing so, it provides a glimpse into the unique local conditions and global commonalities that shape the (mis)use of novel technology, and, ultimately, it reveals the prize to be gained under conditions of fear and uncertainty: power.

Beyond the immediate public health response, underlying many of the book's chapters is a sense that longer horizons are in the minds of both states and the private sector; the overwhelming sentiment in this collection is that technological deployment under COVID-19 functions as a power grab. Emergencies open up new opportunities for power accumulation and redistribution, and both states and the private sector are eager to convert a crisis into an opportunity. For big tech, acquiring power under COVID-19 has been relatively straightforward and rapid. Through interventions disguised as pandemic philanthropy, infrastructural platforms in particular (notably Google, Apple, Facebook, and Amazon) have strengthened their political and economic position in a time of mounting criticism about their role in society. This "reputational laundering" (109; see Wylie's chapter on Canada) proceeds unabated, despite big tech's contributions having limited realized public benefit.

For governments, however, the relationship between emergencies, technologies, and power is less straightforward, and the outcome is less certain. This volume clearly illustrates how states must now often cede a degree of power to big tech, but, more generally, it is also great evidence of what we already know

¹ This work is also available as a free, open-access PDF at <https://meatspacepress.com/go/data-justice-and-covid-19-internet-archive/>.

about state power, political systems, and communicable disease response: state capacity matters (e.g., Gizelis 2009). As Sean McDonald suggests in the opening Commentary, and which is evident from reading across many country Dispatches, technological solutions under COVID-19 are seen by governments as an opportunity to “bridge the gap” (24) left by diminished institutions. But technological solutions on their own are unlikely to work under conditions of weak state capacity; rather it is the strong autocracies (with their ability to introduce new policies or technologies at will) and democracies (with strong institutions and/or levels of public trust) that are more likely to see returns from technological innovations than, say, the United States with its comparatively low levels of trust (see Cohen’s chapter on the US) or Brazil under a wannabe dictator (see Evangelista and Firmino’s chapter on Brazil). For governments with stronger state capacity, technologies are also more likely to be designed and deployed carefully and as part of long-standing epidemiological processes rather than a novel solution (see Wang’s chapter on China, Kim and Yun’s chapter on South Korea, and Chen and Poorthuis’s chapter on Singapore).

Although this power struggle between governments and the private sector does limit the potential for empowerment of individuals and publics, COVID-19 has also made a space (albeit small) for civil society actors wishing to contest digital injustice. While I appreciate that the book focuses on a societal-scale framing in terms of power and justice (more so than individual-level concerns such as personal privacy, with some exceptions), in only a minority of the book’s chapters does individual agency or organized resistance get substantive mentions. The predominant caricature of individuals and publics is one of constrained autonomy and eroded rights, so a reader interested in the spaces of data activism under COVID-19 should supplement this book with other sources—one place to start is with the more recent contributions at the editor’s Global Data Justice project website (<https://globaldatajustice.org>).

A key contribution of the book is the widespread evidence of the folly of the rapidly deployed techno-fix. In parallel, however, the book’s own rapid trajectory from conception to publication inevitably comes with a few limitations that a more elongated gestation period might have afforded. First, the notion of “data justice” ostensibly provides the framework for interrogating the socioeconomic and political concerns arising in the face of accelerating technological power under COVID-19; however, there is very limited explicit engagement with data justice in the book (and, indeed, parallel concepts such as “data power,” “digital justice,” or “data politics” might have worked just as well). Although the aim in this collection is not conceptual advancement, I think the substantial empirical evidence from twenty-eight case studies might actually provide a rich basis for advancing our understanding of data justice more generally. Although the Commentaries (which would perhaps make more sense placed after the country Dispatches) reflect on key themes emerging from the case studies, the lack of a concluding chapter means that the collection misses an opportunity to not only succinctly summarize key findings but also to advance conceptually what we mean by data justice.

Second, the editors argue that the expansion of digital technologies under COVID-19 reveals a “nascent *epidemiological turn in digital surveillance*” (11; emphasis in original). But this suggestion shortchanges both the very long history of digital technologies deployed for epidemiological and population health initiatives under the banner of public health surveillance and the role of public health itself as an instrument of control. Both scholars of surveillance studies and the politics of public health acutely understand the role of population-level health monitoring as surveillance full stop—not separate from, but intimately part of the wider surveillance apparatus built on the twin objectives of care and control. Indeed, the very idea of “population”—referring to a part of society that is definable, measurable, and therefore controllable—is particularly associated with the history of state-led health and sanitation interventions. As well, the forms of techno-fix critiqued in this volume have been the basis for crisis experimentation for years in less democratic countries and places subject to local/regional epidemics (notably, the 2013–2015 West Africa Ebola event). The use of digital technologies in the COVID-19 response, then, should be more appropriately understood as a case in point rather than as evidence of epidemiology as the new frontier of population surveillance. But these are minor points overall, and I highly recommend *Data Justice and COVID-19: Global Perspectives* as a valuable addition to our knowledge-base on the intersection of digital technologies, public health, surveillance, and power.

References

- Gizelis, Theodora-Ismene. 2009. Wealth Alone Does Not Buy Health: Political Capacity, Democracy, and the Spread of AIDS. *Political Geography* 28 (2): 121–131.