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Grassroots Data Activism

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Grassroots Data Activism

M, a professional community organizer in the midwestern United States who works with undocumented youth, talks us through a typical day at work. Her role focuses on the creation, aggregation, and analysis of data using a commercial platform called EveryAction, but she chafes at questions about the procedures, formats, or outputs of data work. Our research team asks a series of questions that prompt respondents such as M to describe the qualities of the data they work with and what they do with it—questions we have used to study other kinds of data professionals, at city offices and in public school districts. After several prodding questions that turn again and again to the particulars of data in her work, M finally tells our interviewers bluntly, “What I’ve learned from many years, now at this point over ten years of organizing, mostly around immigrant rights, is that yes, maybe numbers and facts do cause a shock factor. But people are motivated and persuaded to change because of their feelings and how they feel about something. And you can use that data to help them feel in a particular way, but that’s where the story-telling comes in.”¹

The ongoing public crises of the 2020s illustrate the accelerating datafication of contemporary government bodies at all levels. Public life is increasingly organized around engagements with data, especially data in visual form.² Dashboards produced by national, county, state, and city bureaucracies displayed the grim, unrelenting number of COVID-19 deaths nation-

1 M (community organizer), in discussion with author, June 2022. Names have been changed to protect participants’ privacy, and quotations have been edited for clarity.

2 Helen Kennedy and Rosemary Lucy Hill, “The Feeling of Numbers: Emotions in Everyday Engagements with Data and Their Visualisation,” *Sociology* 52, no. 4 (2018): 830–848, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038516674675>.

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wide, but they also provided quick readouts of laws restricting movement (or restoring it), local hospital capacity, or color-coded masking rules. If, as Michele Murphy writes, dashboards are *phantasmagrams*, graphical objects charged with affective power, then visual artifacts produced by the state in all of their various instantiations are likewise inhabited by some palpable affective charge in excess of the dry quantitative practices for which they stand as proxy.³ It is this excess that grassroots organizers like M are after: a way to evoke feeling, inspire action, and ultimately build power in the communities in which they work. In particular, the way community organizers in working-class communities of color in the United States use data and data visualization shows us that critical information study and media study are happening outside the bureaucratic halls of the state and out of the purview of our academic disciplines. M's caution demands that when we consider political uses of data—including those oppositional or activist projects that seek to build grassroots power through community organizing—we take more seriously the role of narrative, particularly of public narrative.

Public narratives are central to certain strains of contemporary community organizing. These public narratives are organizing tools that express a coherent worldview and articulate an actionable map of power: who has it, who needs it, and how it can be gained. Public narratives link individual, community, and action by illustrating why the individual is called to act, why others must join in that action, and why such action must be immediate.⁴ Community organizing is a technique and philosophy of political action, but it is also, increasingly, a job—one undertaken by skilled and educated workers dedicated to movement goals and employed by overtly political organizations, including many not-for-profit organizations in the public sector. As community organizers train, they practice creating public narratives: personal and compelling stories that inspire the listener to see a problem, to invest emotionally in the redress of that problem, and to join collective actions. Like so many other forms of work, community organizing has become datafied, executed via the commercial tools and platforms used for all kinds of professional work. But for community organizers, data work is not just about data: it is a multifaceted form of knowledge production and, simultaneously, a strategy aimed at changing the world, largely through crafting public narratives that will motivate others to action.

In our research with community organizers based in working-class communities of color, we have found that much of the day-in and day-out work of grassroots organizing involves reusing, recontextualizing, or excerpting data produced by the state. For these organizers, numbers are merely one kind of knowledge, a resource that can be used in service of crafting meaningful, material change. As one organizer expressed in explaining this approach, knowledge that doesn't change the material conditions of the community is

3 Michelle Murphy, *The Economization of Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

4 Marshall Ganz, "Public Narrative, Collective Action, and Power," in *Accountability through Public Opinion: From Inertia to Public Action*, ed. Sina Odugbemi and Taeku Lee (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2011), 273–289.

merely intellectual masturbation.⁵ These organizers warn that assumptions about the ability of data to stand in for reality can jeopardize authentic community action and divert energy and resources from larger movement goals to clerical work—that is, to the creation, maintenance, or consultation of electronic records. As our community partners and allies insist, belief in the power of data can turn into fetishism and superstition. Data can be a useful strategy for making a point or for getting an institution to move, but data is not the point of anything: the point is to get free.

Minoritized communities, perennially differentiated from a “phobic majoritarian public sphere” by race, gender, class, disability, citizenship, and other interlocking forms of socially consequential difference, are formed, shaped, and sustained through the exercise of state power as much as they are by individual acts of discrimination.⁶ Their greater vulnerabilities to crisis are zoned, redlined, redistricted, taxed, subsidized, policed, and gentrified into existence by the very same processes, policies, and (dis)investments captured in public data.⁷ Minoritized communities “remain both dependent upon and vulnerable to *state power*,” to the continual atrophy and sabotage of social welfare and the expanding of the carceral apparatus.⁸ Organizers on the ground—that is, those who live or work in such communities—face tremendous pressure to demonstrate via numbers what their work is about, whether that means counting the numbers of unarmed people killed by police, the concentration of known carcinogens floating in their air, or the average commute time to a job that pays a living wage. And while, with great skill, creativity, and moral power, organizers have incorporated data in various forms in their ongoing freedom struggles, this time-tested strategy has always carried risks.⁹ When it comes to minoritized peoples, the state has not always shown itself to be subject to suasion based on numbers. In other words, city, county, state, and federal bodies might care a lot about numbers, but only when those numbers tell a story that directs resources and authorized violence to where elites and privileged groups want them to go.¹⁰

The organizers we work with and alongside are certainly aware of the potential for data to sway policymakers and other kinds of authorities, perhaps painfully so. And while it is tempting to think of data as a tool for speaking back to power, a *weapon of the geek* that might be used for authentic liberatory purposes, Gabriella Coleman reminds us that the sensibilities and strategies of computationally mediated political activity are most often “exer-

5 R (community organizer), in discussion with author, March 2021.

6 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

7 Kelly Lytle Hernández, Khalil Gibran Muhammad, and Heather Ann Thompson, “Introduction: Constructing the Carceral State,” *Journal of American History* 102, no. 1 (June 2015): 18–24, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jav259>.

8 Jafari S. Allen, *There's a Disco Ball between Us: A Theory of Black Gay Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), x.

9 Roderic Crooks and Morgan Currie, “Numbers Will Not Save Us: Agonistic Data Practices,” *Information Society* 37, no. 4 (2021): 201–213, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01972243.2021.1920081>.

10 Stop LAPD Spying Coalition and Free Radicals, “The Algorithmic Ecology: An Abolitionist Tool for Organizing against Algorithms,” Medium, March 2, 2020, <https://medium.com/@stoplapdspying/the-algorithmic-ecology-an-abolitionist-tool-for-organizing-against-algorithms-14fcbd0e64d0>.

cised by a class of privileged and visible actors who often lie at the center of economic life.”¹¹ As P, a housing justice and anti-eviction organizer, put it in our interview, giving data work a privileged role in the making of public decisions displaces many forms of needed expertise. The act of centering data presumes that, by speaking with and through data, white-collar professionals (and other experts such as academics), rather than the people living with the consequences of social problems (such as housing justice, in the case of P’s work), are telling the right kinds of stories. P describes this deference to data-speak as related to white supremacy, given that the institutions that confer such expertise are themselves riven by the same oppressions and stratifications that structure the public: “Because it’s like you need that white guy academic in the room for them to all of a sudden care about evictions. But if you put a black trans person in front of them talking about how they got evicted, they’d be like, ‘Well, you didn’t pull yourself up by the bootstraps,’ right? Like your story doesn’t matter. Your story isn’t representative of data or whatever.”¹²

There are certainly sophisticated, far-reaching projects that show how data produced by the state can be used by experts and community members to scrutinize the state’s unequal treatment of minoritized communities via racist lending practices, mass incarceration, and police violence.¹³ But the organizers we talk to most frequently are not interested in raising awareness: they are interested in raising power, in forms of radical mutual aid and community education, in unlearning the rules of a game that has long been rigged. These organizers assert again and again that data is an important tool, but data alone cannot tell the story they want to tell. The vibe is definitely one of deep, studied, careful ambivalence with respect to data. For example, H shared his deep misgivings about the need to be counted. His previous organizing work around AIDS in the 1990s demonstrated that showing more cases could force the state to produce more resources for treatment of affected persons and communities. At the same time, his more recent organizing around food security for undocumented residents has sharpened his critique of relying on data to get other resources, given that state violence against immigrants is aided by the collection of data about their existence.

Community organizers are more dedicated to narrative than they are to data. Data can be a resource for a compelling story, but narrative, especially public narrative, is central to the philosophy and practice of community organizing. As some of our community partners put it in a shared writing, “Data can be used to tell stories, but our stories are not data.”¹⁴ What data can never quite capture is a sense of the explicit reckoning with where power

11 Gabriella Coleman, “From Internet Farming to Weapons of the Geek,” *Current Anthropology* 58, no. 15 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1086/688697>.

12 P (Community organizer), in discussion with author, September 2021.

13 Ruha Benjamin, *Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Medford, MA: Polity, 2019); Hernández, Muhammad, and Thompson, “Introduction”; and Sasha Costanza-Chock, *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020).

14 Roderic Crooks, “What We Mean When We Say #AbolishBigData2019,” Medium, March 22, 2019, <https://medium.com/@rncrooks/what-we-mean-when-we-say-abolishbigdata2019-d030799ab22e>.

resides and how it can be wielded. This is the excess that animates much of the grassroots data activism we are interested in: a desire to tap the affective and narrative capacities of data for the advancement of movement and community goals. The organizers we know are telling stories with and through data, but the stories they are telling, crafted to inspire community members to inspect public conditions, carry within them a critique of state power and a clear moral: we get free through collective action and through collective action only.

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