News Item

Reclaiming a Broken Future for the Past | Anthropology News

By Eric Kansa
October 10, 2018

Eric Kansa argues that, in an environment where information and communication technologies (and the data they often collect) are being used for anti-democratic means, archaeology as a discipline has an important role to play. He finds that, as a discipline, archaeology is suited to protecting and recovering data, as well as fostering data literacy. He charts a path for how archaeologists might do a better job of engaging with digital data in a professional way, touching on developing new skills and improving publishing practices within the discipline.

> The revolution in information and communications technologies, which had so much promise for broadening access and participation in scholarship, certainly seems much darker and more ominous now. Social media platforms have been weaponized to subvert democracies and weirdly globalize local nationalisms. Bots and "Big Data" powered analytics, aided by the profit-driven complicity of Facebook and Twitter, now target millions with individually-tailored lies and disinformation. Our engagement with social media now means navigating a territory swept up in a storm of memetic and psychological warfare waged by nation-states and international networks of oligarchs. These realitieseven broke the fertile dystopian imagination of author William Gibson, who had to rewrite his next novel set in the near-future, in order to accommodate Trump's rise to power in his storyline.
>
> Several important works have focused greater socially-informed criticism on the anti-democratic (mis)uses of digital technology. In 2014, Evgeny Morozov published "To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism" to attack what he saw as the naive technocratic optimism of Internet advocates. More recent works focused attention on power inequalities and the lack of public oversight and accountability in algorithm-driven decisions behind

> everything from résumé screening to policing and surveillance, medical insurance, and applications for welfare benefits. Two recent books, "Weapons of Math Destruction" by Cathy O'Neil, and "Automating Inequality" by Virginia Eubanks, highlight how digital data and algorithmic modeling reinforce and exacerbate wealth, racial, and other social inequalities.
>
> These examples illustrate a clear urgency in the need for greater intellectual and political engagement with digital technologies. The fact that manipulated databases, social networks, and bots helped to destabilize the world's most powerful nation highlights how indifference toward digital issues can no longer be an ethically defensible position. While the archaeological past may seem remote from today's online media battles, our ability to practice archaeology and communicate with our stakeholders and colleagues all depends on the outcomes of political struggles over digital information spaces.
>
> […]
>
> Recent years have shown how the weaponization of information technologies can undermine and assault democratic institutions. If archaeology can flourish as an ethical practice, it must more actively engage with digital data. In arguing for the importance of data, we're not suggesting that data are wholly objective or empirical. Data are never complete, perfect, or absolutely objective. As brilliantly discussed by Cathy O'Neal, data reflect our incomplete and often biased views of the world. Because data, like other forms of knowledge, are imperfect, they need to be a part of open conversations and debates in civil society. If we do a better job at making data more open to critique and evaluation from people with a wider variety of perspectives, we can improve both the data and our understandings derived from them. By confronting this challenge head-on, we can repair a future that now seems so broken.

Source: Reclaiming a Broken Future for the Past | Anthropology News