

# Alison Powell on Data Walking

**KEYWORDS:** data walking; datafication; ethnography; critical making; knowledge construction

Alison Powell is a communications scholar, based at the London School of Economics and Political Science. In her early work, she focused on the interactions or exchanges between humans and technologies: on how the building of technologies is affected by people's values, but also, how technological systems in turn change how people work, or cohabit. More recently, she has shown particular interest in how contemporary communities and citizenships take shape, specifically in the context of 'smart cities' – but also, which concerns citizenships raise at a time of datafication.

In this interview, we discuss the so-called 'data walk' (or 'data walkshop'), a participatory methodology for discussion on data and its ethics, situated in urban space, that Powell developed. On a dedicated website, she characterises data walking as 'a strategy for research creation and public engagement' that involves people going out onto the street, looking at digital data and information from a specific perspective or concern. It is designed to elicit 'discussions about data based in a shared experience of observing and moving through space' in an attempt to 'break down hierarchies of knowledge'.<sup>1</sup> Below, we discuss its key features, but also delve into the history of such practices of reflective walking.

– Eef Masson and Karin van Es



*Alison Powell.*

*EM/KvE*: Can you explain first how you came to the idea of experimenting with data walking in your teaching practice? Also, can you elaborate on the objectives of this methodology?

*AP*: I first started thinking about combining walking, observational methods and performative reflections on knowledge production because I wanted my students to consider what it meant to *create* data through ethnographic observation, and *interpret* this data while they were collecting it. This is a common feature of ethnographic practice, but it is also what happens when we interrogate ‘big data’ that are heterogeneous. As datafication took flight, I wanted to develop this into a public intervention that would be an open invitation to people – not only students – to think about what data is, how they might define it, where they might find it, and how the process of ‘seeing’ data in everyday life might involve addressing specific matters of concern.

My hope in creating a framework for data walking is to build a set of tools that others can use, and to set up an intellectual conversation that will generate new experiments in understanding how we define data, shape knowledge, but also teach and engage publics in new ways. I started off this process by building the website and by sharing my ideas, so that others could use it. Since then, the practice of data walking seems to have gained a viral quality, and it is now used in many different contexts. Applications range from exploring the uses of open data in Accra, Ghana (at the Africa Open Data Conference), via public consultation in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, to undergraduate teaching in Texas, US, and community-university research partnership development in Vancouver, Canada and Seattle, US.

*EM/KvE*: Can you briefly outline the process of data walking, as you practice it?

*AP*: A ‘data walkshop’, as I call it, usually begins with a first meeting of people who define a shared matter of concern, and preliminarily discuss how ‘data’ might be defined in relation to it. (Examples of such ‘matters of concern’ are surveillance, social justice and discrimination, but also urban design or trade, or the creation of a data commons.) Each member of a walking group takes on a particular role in observing and documenting encounters with data. There are five key roles, fulfilled by, respectively:

- a navigator, who chooses the path to walk;
- a photographer, who captures evidence of data as defined and understood by the group;
- a map-maker, who documents the path travelled and the important elements encountered along the way;
- a note-taker, who notes observations of the space;
- a collector, who identifies a significant object to bring back (and in some versions of the walk, this person also interacts with the online world, following bots or identifying social media information being created about the locations of the walk).

When I teach with data walks, I often follow the walk with a creative activity, in order to point out to people what happens as they abstract their knowledge – and what it means to ‘bring knowledge back together’ to integrate different points of view. To this end, I also appropriate strategies of ‘critical making’ to transform and engage with the observations made during the walk.

Critical making has been lauded as a means to inspire active citizenship and celebrate everyday practice and experience of life.<sup>2</sup> It focuses on how do-it-yourself creative production can act as a form of everyday political and social critique. In applying critical making as a pedagogical tool, I introduce students to ideas of thinking together through material and bodily practice and continue Garnet Hertz's activist design project of using critical design and critical making to advance alternative futures.<sup>3</sup>

Recently, I collaborated with Joe Shaw and Andrew Dwyer from Oxford University to add an aspect of ethnographic practice to the project, centring on the idea of the geotagged digital trace left by others. We experimented with programming a simple Twitter bot, that during the walk, connected words related to our matters of concern to specific locations. In doing so, we drew attention to the fact that our experience of smart cities also comes through the relational, interactive elements of social media data.

*EM/KvE:* How does your version of data walking differ from other forms of reflection on data in an urban context?

*AP:* Some work in geography and communication studies assumes that urban mediation consists of what Mikkel Flyverbom and Anders Madsen call 'data produced by objects': the strata of data produced by sensors and cameras.<sup>4</sup> As the emerging literature on data, space and value indicates, this data becomes integrated into organisational, calculative and decision-making processes that structure the experience of urban space. A narrow view of 'environmentality' might suggest that it is the data thus produced by objects that helps to construct our subjectivity within urban space. Our walks however suggest that it is the performance of observation and narrative reconstruction that produces this subjectivity. Moreover, this process can be transformative, as it produces new forms of collective or collaborative knowledge. Thinking about performance and the 'liveness' of knowledge construction as it happens in real time, on the street, in practice, is one of the things I seek to develop with these walks.

One common focus of critique on the walks emerged from the experience of observing traces of data-based surveillance. In every walk, some participants photographed the banal architecture of surveillance: blank-surfaced round surveillance cameras hanging from above in university campuses and privatised shopping areas; passcode-protected gates and doors that close spaces off to those without the data; or, train station turnstiles with RFID (radio-frequency identification) tag readers that collect data on who passes.

*EM/KvE:* Can you talk a bit about the history of data walking, in its different incarnations?

*AP:* Data walks are part of a tradition of 'walking methods' that include psychogeographic explorations of the city, or the anthropological tradition of walking pioneered by Tim Ingold, but also theatrical traditions where participants play particular roles in order to break down their habitual practices and ways of constructing knowledge. In addition, looking for and making data about the city also has antecedents in ethnography. The data walk as I see it draws on the concepts of 'flashmob ethnography' developed by design researcher Laura Forlano, and I am inspired also by urban theorist Adam Greenfield and his partner Nurri Kim, who proposed

‘networked workshops’.<sup>5</sup> The latter involved carefully looking at urban information infrastructures and their relationship to space, and focused on

- ‘Places where information is being collected by the network.
- Places where networked information is being displayed.
- Places where networked information is being acted upon, either by people directly, or by physical systems that affect the choices people have available to them.’<sup>6</sup>

In terms of method, Forlano’s version of the walking experiment called for small groups to explore urban areas they were unfamiliar with, and made each member of the group responsible for a particular feature of the ethnographic encounter: photography, map-making, thick description and interviewing. In Forlano’s initial experiment, the goal was to observe ‘the role of values in urban infrastructure and the built environment (including public spaces, retail shopping environments, restaurants and cafes).’ She writes: ‘Specifically, the workshop encourages participants to look for and document tensions, surprises and counter-intuitive findings.’<sup>7</sup>

We can’t ‘see’ digital data very easily, although we can see its physical traces in cameras and other material devices and infrastructures installed in the city. Many theorists of walking methods suggest that paying attention to the things that other people usually ignore is a key feature of these methods. The walking, observing, reflecting and remaking originally appeared within a frame inspired by Michel de Certeau’s attention to everyday life, Walter Benjamin’s celebration of walking and reflection in the Arcades project, the psychogeographic tradition and other radical reinterpretations of life in designed spaces such as those of the Situationists.<sup>8</sup> Walking and watching are practices of the type that De Certeau claims create our cities, and I wanted to articulate these practices to the technological mediations that I had been investigating in other research, specifically work on the concept of the ‘smart city’ as it evolved over time.<sup>9</sup>

Ultimately, data walking and the kind of concentrated observation and mapping that I was doing were also part of what some writers called ‘neogeography’ – the idea of looking at and critiquing the layers of information connected with different spaces. Neogeographers often discuss the ‘deep mapping’ that results from layering over different kinds of knowledge and information in the same place.

## Notes

1. “About the Project,” *Data Walking* website, [www.datawalking.org/about/](http://www.datawalking.org/about/) (accessed 24 August 2018).
2. On the relation between critical making and active citizenship, see Matt Ratto and Megan Boler, *DIY Citizenship: Critical Making and Social Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014).
3. For critical making as a pedagogical tool, see Alison Powell, “Democratizing Production through Open Source Knowledge: From Open Software to Open Hardware,” *Media, Culture & Society* 34, no. 6 (September 2012): 691–708, and Garnet Hertz, *Critical Making* (self-pub., 2012), also at <http://www.conceptlab.com/criticalmaking/> (accessed 24 August 2018). For more on thinking through material and bodily practice, see Matthew B. Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

4. Mikkel Flyverbom and Anders K. Madsen, "Sorting Data Out: Unpacking Big Data Value Chains and Algorithmic Knowledge Production," in *Die Gesellschaft der Daten: Über die digitale Transformation der sozialen Ordnung*, ed. Florian Süssenguth (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2016), 123–144, specifically 1.
5. Laura Forlano, "Flashmob Ethnography Workshop," *Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference*, no. 1 (August–September 2010): 307, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-8918.2010.00030.x>; Adam Greenfield, "How to Bring a Systems/Layers Walkshop to Your Town," *Speedbird* website, 20 May 2010, <https://speedbird.wordpress.com/2010/05/10/how-to-bring-a-systemslayers-walkshop-to-your-town/>.
6. Greenfield, "How to Bring".
7. Forlano, "Flashmob Ethnography Workshop".
8. Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City," in: *The Production of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 91–110; Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
9. Alison Powell, "WiFi Publics: Producing Community and Technology," *Information, Communication & Society* 11, no. 8 (December 2008): 1068–1088; Powell, "Democratizing Production through Open Source Knowledge"; Alison Powell, "Coding Alternative Modes of Governance: Learning from Experimental Peer-to-Peer Cities," in *Code and the City*, ed. Rob Kitchin and Sung-Yueh Perng (London: Routledge, 2016), 178–195.

## Biography

**Alison Powell** is an assistant professor in Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and programme director of its MSc in Data & Society. Her research examines the process of technology design and the ethics of data, and her published work covers issues of participation, design, policy and access to the evolving internet. Notable articles are "WiFi Publics", in *New Media and Society* (2008), or more recent work on moral and ethical issues in technology design. Her research projects stress interdisciplinary collaboration, public engagement and creative methods. Her book *Data Sense* is under contract with Yale University Press and should be forthcoming in 2019.