Metric Power

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For Mum and Dad
Some things can't be measured.

Preface

All books inevitably carry some of the flavour of their times. The pages of this text are no different; they have undoubtedly been embossed with the moment in which it was produced. This book emerged during a time when the presence of metrics was notably escalating in higher education. One recent report has described this as a kind of 'metric tide' (Wilsdon et al. 2015). I suspect that my ideas have been tinged by the tincture of these apparent changes in academia. Yet this is certainly not a book about academic work or higher education. Rather, this is a book that I hope will speak to people with a general interest in how power operates today. It is most obviously a book about data assemblages, culture, and new media forms, but I hope that it will also be of some use to those with an interest in questions of power, governance, cultural politics, and political sociology. Amongst these more general aims, and to give an opening feel of its content, this book attempts to provide the reader with the conceptual means for thinking critically about the role of metrics in contemporary society and culture. The book is not comprehensive in its descriptions of the types of metrics that act upon us, but it is hoped that the ideas contained here can be applied widely in response to the powerful use of metrics in the ordering and governance of our lives. I will explain this in far more detail in Chap. 1; I would like though to use this very brief preface just to offer some reflections on the cultivation of the ideas contained in this book and the approach that I have taken.

Sometime during the academic year 2011–2012, I devised a new post-graduate module. I gave that module the rather provisional-feeling title 'Digital By-Product Data and the Social Sciences'. It was a little wordy, but I wasn't sure that the label 'big data' was appropriate at that time. I knew that the title was just a vehicle for capturing something that was unfolding in social science. As I began to write this book, I was delivering this module for the third and final time (it is to be replaced by a new incarnation in early 2016). Each year the module had just over 30 students on it—I thank the students for their enthusiasm and depth of discussion over the last three years. Working on this module and working with these students has really helped to reveal the potential gaps that need attention in this emergent field of research. Initially this module was intended to provide a space in which students could begin to think about how they might use new types of digital data for doing social research. As I taught the module, things seemed to change. I realised that in order for these general objectives to be achieved we needed to do more to enhance our critical and imaginative faculties, particularly when presented with these emergent forms of data. The data itself was not necessarily the problem, although data access was always likely to be a pre-occupation; the difficultly was instead in finding the means to think critically about them. The problem was in finding ways to craft questions that might be asked about, through and with such data. My conclusion was that we need to see these big data differently. We need to foster some alternative perspectives that go beyond those scripted into the data. We need to look at them with fresh eyes. We need to carve out some new vantage points that will allow us to see what types of questions might be asked with such data, to see how these data become part of the social world and to see how we might respond critically to the ways that these data shape and cajole the social world into new formations (or maintain obdurate social orders). In short, we needed to work on being more assertive in our response to the emergence of big data. The stuff that is called 'big data' undoubtedly creates important questions about our analyses and techniques, but they create more pressing questions about the sharpness of our imaginations. As I argue later in this book, the challenge of big data is as much one for the imagination as it is for our technical skills—it is a challenge of thoughtfulness, not just of learned skill or know-how. It

is in the provocation of the imagination that this book intends to make an intervention in debates on the new types of data and what they mean.

As I taught the module, it became clear to me that we needed more engagement with the politics of the data themselves, and in particular we needed to see how data, in the form of metrics, could be seen to be measuring us in new and powerful ways. As a result, it seemed important to explore the relations between metrics and power. The results of the insights that I accumulated via this module are to be found permeating through the pages of this book. My suggestion is that by developing such critical vistas we may see how to utilise new forms of 'big data' and how we might reconceive our research questions. More importantly though, we might also then come to understand the part that metrics play in the ordering of the social world and in the shaping of our lives. Any analysis of big data should start from such a vantage point. We need to understand how metrics implicate and are implicated by the versions of the social that they purport to reveal. We also need to understand our own participation in both revealing and potentially challenging the measures of the world that they produce.

When I was a good way through the background work for this book, somewhere around the mid-point in the writing process, I stumbled upon an interview with Michel Foucault. Foucault's words jumped out of the page; they just seemed to chime with the work I was doing for the book. In the interview, Foucault (1991a: 73–74) describes his own work in the following terms:

> My work takes place between unfinished abutments and anticipatory strings of dots. I like to open up a space of research, try it out, and then if it doesn't work, try again somewhere else. On many points…I am still working and don't yet know whether I am going to get anywhere. What I say ought to be taken as 'propositions', 'game openings' where those who are interested are invited to join in.

Whilst writing I found the open-ended and exploratory sentiment of this passage resonated. It spoke directly to the type of project that I was trying to develop—a project based on an attempt to join together some disparate dots. Clearly, this book is not able to explore all of the

permutations and intersections between metrics and power; this is a massive project that will need continuous and close attention. I hope though that this book will be seen, in Foucault's words, as a set of propositions and openings. My hope is that the conceptual materials I develop here will form a framework for further and more nuanced analyses of the relations between metrics and power, a set of relations that needs renewed attention in the current context (see Chap. 1). This book then, to try to absorb some of Foucault's style and sentiment, is a kind of invitation to the reader to join in. The book is aimed at helping us to work together to join some of the dots that pattern around the social implications of a rising interest in the capabilities and possibilities of metrics, numbers, and calculation. My suggestion, for the moment at least, is that we begin to sketch these connections in pencil.

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The content of the book is entirely new, but a handful of paragraphs from three short pieces have made their way, in revised form, into the final manuscript. Thanks go to Mark Carrigan for allowing me to publish a short piece on the Apple Watch on his *Sociological Imagination* blog, which helped me to develop a short passage that is included in Chap. 1. A fragment of Chap. 3 is based upon a few passages drawn from the short magazine piece 'The New Circulations of Culture', which was published in the magazine *Berfrois*—thanks go to Russell Bennetts who edits *Berfrois*. Finally, thanks also go to Nathan Manning for the invitation to

write a review of Btihaj Ajana's book *Governing Through Biometrics* for the journal *Information, Communication and Society*. Writing that review really helped me to formulate the ideas in the section on biometrics contained in Chap. 2.

This book is dedicated to my loving mum and dad. I'd also like to mention Nona, who has been a great source of support and humour along the way. As always, I give special and immeasurable thanks to Erik and Martha.

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