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(Infra)structural Perversion: Meta/data for Archival Hospitality

Digital infrastructures are making qualitative data more openly available, supporting its collaborative analysis, and facilitating their communication to scholarly and other publics. But like any infrastructure, digital “middleware” platforms are both enabled and limited by their material codings, especially the metadata that makes data available for work and play. These codings enact semiotic ideologies: fundamental, usually tacit assumptions and understandings about what signs are and what can and should be done with them. Based on ethnographic experience in designing, building, and using one such instance of middleware, the Platform for Experimental Collaborative Ethnography (PECE), this paper analyzes how different semiotic ideologies produce different styles of data availability in different qualitative data archives, including the Human Resources Area Files (HRAF), the Qualitative Data Repository (QDR), the Toxic Docs project, and the Formosa Plastics Global Archive infrastructured by PECE. Crudely conceived, these semiotic ideologies and their associated styles of data availability run from the positivist to the interpretivist, often cast as “two cultures.” These epistemic differences are infrastructured into the digital middleware platforms, calling not for infrastructural inversion but rather perversion, a de-normalizing from both within and without (infra-). At the same time the scholarly good of “data availability,” this paper argues, needs to be reconceptualized and re-coded in terms of archival hospitality, a matter not only of providing digital access but of creating digital (infra)structures that are welcoming, encourage lingering, and cultivate unexpected and lively encounters.

“Data availability” is itself (infra)structured by meta/data and other coded elements of “middleware” for archiving and sharing data on digital platforms for which semiotic elements like “(the parenthetical),” ~~the written under erasure~~, and “/” are somewhat strange and difficult to systematize.

Analyzing semiotic ideologies and styles of availability may start as “Infrastructural inversion” by which, for example, positivism is shown to rely on interpretivism or quantitative analysis shown to run on qualitative. But when the analyst is not exterior to but immanent to the material-semiotic system to which she is immanent and reliant upon ends in an (infra)structural perversion, where by an analyst perverts from within. In the process, positivism and interpretivism can be understood not as two separate epistemic cultures but as a non-integral (neither one nor two cultures, and both one and two)

whereby an analyst exterior to the system flips and surfaces an unseen foundation to expose its effects on a higher level structure

interpretation: not something to accomplish, something to endure or abide with. It’s a place, not a thing or an act – the open space of a structure with some degree of play.

“Wanting to lay down the law for each and every science is the project of positivism. I'm not sure that one doesn't find a similar temptation at work in certain kinds of 'renovated' Marxism, one which consists in saying, 'Marxism, as the science of sciences, can provide the theory of science and draw the boundary between science and ideology'. Now this role of referee, judge and universal witness is one which I absolutely refuse to adopt, because it seems to me to be tied up with philosophy as a university institution.”

Michel Foucault, Questions on Geography, pp.64-65, in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, Pantheon 1980.