

## DATAFICATION

Ana Filipa Joaquim

(IPRI-NOVA, Universidade Nova de Lisboa and Instituto Politécnico de Portalegre)

### Definition

Datafication refers to the process through which aspects of social, economic, and cultural life are transformed into quantifiable and analyzable data through digital technologies. Unlike digitization, which merely involves converting analogue information into digital formats, datafication entails a deeper epistemological and institutional transformation, whereby social practices are increasingly conceived, monitored, and evaluated through metrics and algorithms. This process translates human actions, emotions, and interactions into units of information that feed systems of analysis, prediction, and management. Datafication is closely linked to the expansion of big data, the platform economy, and algorithmic governance, and is widely regarded as one of the structural pillars of digital modernity and contemporary surveillance capitalism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Mayer-Schnberger, 2013; Van Dijck, 2014).

### Context

The concept of datafication has gained significant academic relevance over the past decade, in parallel with the diffusion of digital infrastructures capable of recording and analyzing virtually all dimensions of everyday life. Its emergence is closely associated with the big data paradigm, which promotes the belief that large-scale data collection can reveal objective patterns about human and social behavior (Mayer-Schnberger, 2013). Critical scholarship, however, has emphasized that datafication is not merely a technical innovation but also a political and economic process.

For authors such as Van Dijck (2014), datafication operates as an ideology, referred to as *dataism*, which privileges quantification and traceability over other forms of knowledge production. Couldry and Mejias (2019) argue that datafication constitutes a new form of colonialism, whereby human interactions are appropriated and transformed into economic resources by digital platforms. This process of “*data colonialism*” underpins the model of surveillance capitalism, in which value is generated through the extraction, processing, and circulation of behavioral data (Zuboff, 2019).

Within sociology and media studies, datafication is examined as a force that reconfigures the relationships between subjects, institutions, and information. By enabling the

quantification of practices that were previously qualitative, it reshapes power relations, privacy, and individual autonomy. Data-driven governance thus emerges as a new regime of knowledge and control, in which algorithmic systems increasingly replace human judgement in social and political decision-making processes (Beer, 2019).

Contemporary academic reflection on datafication therefore seeks to address its epistemological, ethical, and political implications, highlighting the need for critical approaches that recognize both its transformative potential and its structural risks for democratic and social life.

### Related Concepts

Algorithm, Data-driven campaign, Digital colonialism, Digital disconnection, Digital governance, Digital natives, Digital Service Act, Digital transformation, E-government, Platform politics

### References

- Beer, D. (2019). *The Data Gaze: Capitalism, Power and Perception*. SAGE Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526463210>
- Couldry, N., & Mejias, U. A. (2019). *The costs of connection: How data is colonizing human life and appropriating it for capitalism*. Stanford University Press.
- Mayer-Schnberger, V. (2013). *Big Data: A Revolution That Will Transform How We Live, Work and Think*. Viktor Mayer-Schnberger and Kenneth Cukier. John Murray.
- Van Dijck, J. (2014). Datafication, dataism and dataveillance: Big Data between scientific paradigm and ideology. *Surveillance & Society*, 12(2), 197–208. <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v12i2.4776>
- Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. PublicAffairs.

Suggested citation: Joaquim, Ana Filipa (2026), “Datification”, *Dictionary on Digitalization and Democracy*, RELINK<sup>2</sup> Cost Action 23114. <https://relink2.eu/>