

Ethics of Data Relations and Smart City

Abstract

The concept of data relations has recently attracted some attention in critical technology and media scholarship. This particular approach to data-driven platforms borrows the Marxist notion of relations of production and explores how the datafication of everyday life implies and also justifies certain social relations (e.g. commodifying, exploitative). The notion of 'data relations' posits an insightful approach to also explore and formulate the ethical implications of data-driven platforms and the certain socio-economic relations stemming from them. I take 'data relations' not necessarily as justifying certain social relations as the term relations of production suggests, but merely as processes and relations stemming from data-driven platforms.

In this paper, I focus on the concept and nature of smart city applications in particular as a data-driven platform, by paying attention to data relations it accommodates and their potential ethical implications. This particular ethics of data relations approach applied to the concept of smart city brings about many insights and paves the way a certain ethical methodologies that are process-oriented and that can benefit from the standpoint of the individuals.

In the first part of the paper, I motivate the 'data relations' approach by suggesting three main features of data-driven platforms taking smart city applications as a case in point. What I consider the features of smart city platforms are that they are (i) limited by the neo-liberal design, (ii) based on datafication, and (iii) enabling algorithmic relations. In the second part of the paper, I provide a process-oriented ethics of data relations approach to the smart city platforms by offering three exemplary ethically charged issues or processes: (a) commodification of personal mobility data points, (b) exclusionary practices towards certain minority groups in the making of the city, and (c) certain potential algorithmic relations that might hinder the moral responsibility of big-tech companies. In the last part, I suggest that exploring such ethical issues in the case of smart cities warrant more bottom-up ethical methodologies such as taking into consideration how city-dwellers perceive values such as social equality in the urban space – in order to inform smart urban systems design.

Keywords: Datafication, data relations, ethics, smart city, urban justice