

Retoryka ciała i umysłu w XXI wieku

Rhetoric of body and mind in the 21st century

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RECENZJA/REVIEW

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Introduction

Although the reviewed book is not primarily about rhetoric, it demonstrates how rhetoric can serve as a productive approach for examining data, especially in its communicative and critical dimensions. *Critical Data Literacies: Rethinking Data and Everyday Life* by Luci Pangrazio and Neil Selwyn explores the intersection of data, literacy, and everyday digital practices. This review examines how this book can inspire rhetoricians and contribute to rhetorical criticism, particularly within the context of critical data literacy.

Before delving into the subject matter, let me briefly characterize the volume and its authors. The 208-page book includes an intriguing prologue, eight chapters, a glossary, references, and an index. Both authors represent (at the time of writing) Australian universities: Luci Pangrazio is a Senior Lecturer in Language and Literacy Education at Deakin University, and Neil Selwyn is a Distinguished Professor at Monash University, specializing in the intersection of education and technology. The volume, published by The MIT Press, reflects these scholarly profiles.

Previous Works

The topic of data has been explored in several academic publications within social studies and humanities. In 2013, The MIT Press released a collection of essays edited by Lisa Gitelman titled “*Raw Data*” *Is an Oxymoron* (Gitelman, ed. 2013), which addressed the historical aspects of (pre-digital) data and contemporary issues like ‘cooked’ data, *dataverse*, and *dataveillance*. This work aligns with the

concepts recalled by Pangrazio and Selwyn, such as *critical data studies*, *data assemblage*, and *new/critical data literacies*.

Similarly, the co-edited book *The Datafied Society: Studying Culture through Data* (Schäfer, eds. 2017) aims at critical reflections on big data, challenging overly optimistic expectations on what information and data may bring, and raising important political and ethical questions regarding its collection, handling, and presentation of (digital) data.

For instance, in the chapter “Digital Methods: From Challenges to *Bildung*,” Bernhard Rieder and Theo Röhle discuss the critical stance of employing digital literacy, programming, and statistics in the humanities and social sciences. They identify five challenges, which partly overlap with the issues addressed by Pangrazio and Selwyn. Among these, three are particularly noteworthy: ‘The Lure of Objectivity,’ ‘Black-boxing,’ and ‘The Quest for Universalism’ (Rieder & Röhle 2017, 112-114).

‘The Lure of Objectivity’ refers to the false notion that computers can transcend human particularities to achieve true objectivity. In reality, computer outputs are always the result of specific inputs, programming codes, and computing methods. This challenge raises questions about “how the epistemological surplus that [is] provided by computation can be specified, controlled, and relayed to others without falling victim to the sometimes deceptive simplicity of graphical user interfaces and shiny visualizations” (Rieder & Röhle 2017, 112).

‘Black-boxing’ and ‘The Quest for Universalism’ center on the idea that digital methods can represent reality by translating it into a system of rules that can be calculated. This approach questions the transparency and universality of digital methodologies and their ability to accurately represent complex social realities (Rieder & Röhle 2017, 113).

Another chapter, “Towards a Reflexive Digital Data Analysis” by Karin van Es, Nicolás López Coombs, and Thomas Boeschoten, also aligns with the ideas discussed in “Critical Data Literacies.” By unpacking misconceptions about the nature and role of data and focusing on research methods, Es, Coombs, and Boeschoten pose numerous questions regarding the stages of data acquisition, cleaning, and analysis that should be asked by every critical data consumer. As they conclude:

For consumers of data, these efforts will hopefully contribute to an increased awareness of the stages involved in the production of data and the adoption of a critical stance towards the data they interpret and make sense of. As we come to live in an increasingly datafied society, these aims seem more relevant than ever (Es, López Coombs, and Boeschoten 2017, 179).

Data as a form of social and symbolic power has already been described by scholars like Catherine D’Ignazio and Lauren Klein in their book *Data Feminism* (2020).

This approach also “asserts that data are not neutral or objective. They are the products of unequal social relations, and this context is essential for conducting accurate, ethical analysis” (<https://data-feminism.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/czq9dfs5/release/3>).

Lastly, Luci Pangrazio, along with Julian Sefton-Green (2019), also discusses the intersection of datafication and literacy paradigms to understand digital data, differentiating how data literacy might be distinct from media literacy and digital literacy. Their approach focuses on the individual perspective of the ‘data user/giver,’ highlighting the importance of data literacy in democratic processes.

These examples show that the scholarly debate on data literacy emerged over a decade ago, and “Critical Data Literacies” should be reviewed within this context.

Content

In the initial chapters, the authors position themselves between “dataism” (the belief that data-driven processes are inherently good) and a pessimistic view of the data-driven world. They introduce terms like *data hype* and *data despondency* to represent the contemporary polarized discourse on digital data. They argue that a critical approach to data involves looking for meaningful and valuable instances and advocating for marginalized voices in data discussions.

Chapter 1 introduces three reasons to develop a critical understanding of data: (1) *You Do Not Have to Give Your Data Away*, (2) *You Do Not Have to Be a “Numbers Person,”* and (3) *Your Data Is a Political Issue* (pp. 9-14). (The way how they are expressed represents to some extent the easy-to-digest profile of this book). These reasons frame the increasingly significant role of digital data in people’s lives and its societal impacts—from misinformation through to miscarriages of justice (p. 21). In this chapter, the readers are also introduced to “The idea of critical data literacies (...) [that] reflects this willingness to actively engage with the complexity of a topic such as digital data” (p. 13).

Chapter 2, “What Is Data?”, develops a working knowledge of basic data-related terms, processes, and presumptions that underpin the idea of critical data literacies (p. 29). It recalls the notions of data footprints vs. data shadows, i.e., data that is created and captured whether someone wants it to be or not (p. 34). These considerations are even more important in terms of *personal data* and its relation to data profiling and the broader data economy. For the sake of critical literacy analysis, four types of data can be distinguished:

1. **provided:** originating from actions by the individual that they are fully aware of;
2. **observed and recorded;**

3. **retrieved**: resulting from manipulation of existing data but then becoming a new data point related to the individual;
4. **inferred**: created through probability-based analytics and then attributed to the individual (pp. 40-41).

These distinctions highlight data's persuasive potential, making it an interesting subject for rhetorical analysis.

In Chapter 3, "Thinking Theoretically about Data," the authors explore how different academic fields have theorized personal data issues, making connections between critical data studies (see also the volume *Data Lives: How Data Are Made and Shape Our World* by Rob Kitchin, 2021) and critical literacies. They formulate thoughts rooted in data justice, data feminism, and sociomateriality studies. However, these notions do not introduce anything fundamentally new. Moreover, the authors emphasize the importance of developing a practical framework for the broader public to use theoretical work effectively. They conclude with a series of questions, one of which may be particularly interesting for rhetoricians: "What is the most productive way to conceptualize data in order to build people's knowledge and understanding of datafication processes?" (p. 73).

Chapter 4 elaborates on the concept of critical data literacies (CDL), contrasting "the new literacy approach" with "old" more instrumental approaches. It offers a framework for CDL consisting of five domains: Data Identification, Data Understandings, Data Reflexivity, Data Strategies, and Data Tactics. Each domain is critical in orientation ("[...] even the simple act of identifying where digital data is generated is an inherently critical act" [p. 89]), with key questions and actions discussed in subsequent chapters (chapters 5-7). These five domains appear to be the most significant contribution of this volume. However, the elaboration on each provides only a broad overview rather than an in-depth analysis.

The authors seem fully aware of this limitation. For instance, when they briefly introduce five types of data that create the 'language of data', they write: "The purpose of highlighting these data types is to bring greater awareness to **nondata specialists** (emphasis – EM) about the types of data that are generated and collected." Following this pattern, each topic is discussed in a few paragraphs, covering issues such as bias and transparency of data, AI and (un)supervised learning, personalization, and security. As the Australian scholars conclude:

Most important, the critical data literacy framework just outlined in this chapter offers the basis for a more systematic approach to supporting people and communities to engage more critically with digital data and the ongoing datafication of everyday life. The critical data literacies framework therefore brings together both bottom-up and top-down responses to datafication and organizes these into domains leading to more critical and agentic data practices. (p. 94)

Chapter 7, “Reappropriating and Resisting Digital Data: Collective Tactics and Activism,” discusses data activism and describes data as something that can be contested. The authors focus on increasing ‘data agency, data imaginations, and alternate forms of doing data,’ (p. 157) providing inspiration for rhetorical analysis.

The final chapter, “Data Futures,” presents three possible scenarios anticipating the influence of datafication on our lives. The authors draw interesting contexts of a ‘rampant data economy,’ ‘communitarian cooperative culture,’ and ‘datafication in an era of climate change.’ In each scenario, data literacy is shaped differently. However, in all scenarios, “the idea of critical data literacies as a means of better understanding, analyzing, and changing our relationships with digital data” (p. 165) is crucial for social coexistence.

Conclusions: Data and Rhetorical Criticism Practice

Pangrazio and Selwyn excel in deconstructing dominant narratives surrounding data. They argue that digital data is created rather than mined or harvested, challenging the metaphor of data as “new oil.” This problematization of metaphors invites readers to question the commodification of personal information and its ethical ramifications.

Notwithstanding the authors’ scholarly background and the volume’s prime objectives, the book addresses the rhetorical construction of data as a resource, revealing power dynamics and ideological biases inherent in data practices. This is crucial for rhetoricians focused on exposing the underlying assumptions of societal discourses. The authors highlight the alignment between critical data studies and the critical literacy tradition, emphasizing voice, agency, and dialogue as strategies for change.

“Critical Data Literacies: Rethinking Data and Everyday Life” is a valuable resource for rhetoricians interested in the role of data in shaping public discourse, identity, and power dynamics. Despite its limitations, the book’s commitment to critical pedagogy makes it a contribution to the field, advocating for transparent and equitable data practices and democratizing technology.

In summary, while the volume sometimes struggles to balance its dual aims of addressing academic and popular audiences, it offers insights and frameworks that can inspire further contributions to rhetorical studies and critical engagement with digital technologies.

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