

Embracing digital failure

Exploring the failure of digital data in Europe

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Research group: Urban Geography

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Project description

Discourses on digital technologies suggest that our lives will get 'better' through continued innovation. For example, we are told that facial recognition technologies will lead to better local/national security, that smart home systems (e.g. Amazon Alexa) will make our lives more convenient, and that collecting exercise data will improve our fitness. These narratives argue that the expansion of digital data (and technologies) will lead to the creation of utopian futures (Kitchin, 2023) which ensures innovations are continually invested – as tech companies profit from the data extracted from people's everyday lives. This utopian future is rooted in capitalist, neoliberal and heteronormative logics, and digital innovation is seen as 'progressive', 'productive' and 'successful' – and therefore the *only* legitimate future for our societies. In these discourses and narratives, success stories of digital technologies are told and retold, and the failures are often forgotten. But data often fails; it can fail to recognise diverse people (for example, facial recognition software can mis-recognise people); or it can fail in making lives more convenient (for example, Google Maps creating inefficient travel routes).

Embracing Digital Failure (EDF) explores and exposes the different failings of digital technologies – particularly focusing on digital data – to challenge the dominant narratives of success. The project does not seek to fix the failing data systems, but to use the failures to challenge capitalist and neoliberal constructions of success and progress. The project uses feminist and queer theoretical work that argues failure can open moments of resistance or alternative ways of being.

In this project, you will identify different examples of data failure from particular study sites (to be determined) across Europe. You will search different forms of media for these examples. Once these examples have been identified, you will analyse them to explore the types of failure. You will also conduct a literature review on critical data studies and failures.

Job Requirements

This project would be well suited to a student who has an interest in digital geographies and/or feminist/queer geographies and who would like to develop secondary data collection and analysis skills.

- Some qualitative research analysis skills (e.g. taken the Advanced Methods course)
- Ability to review and synthesise academic literature
- English language proficiency