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Not Just a number? NEETs, data and datalogical systems

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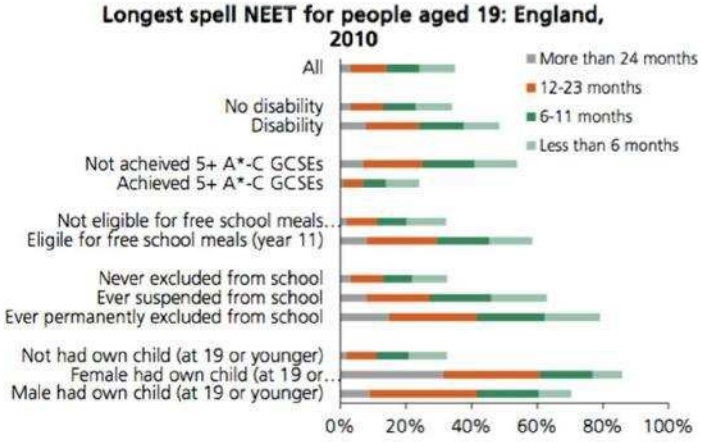
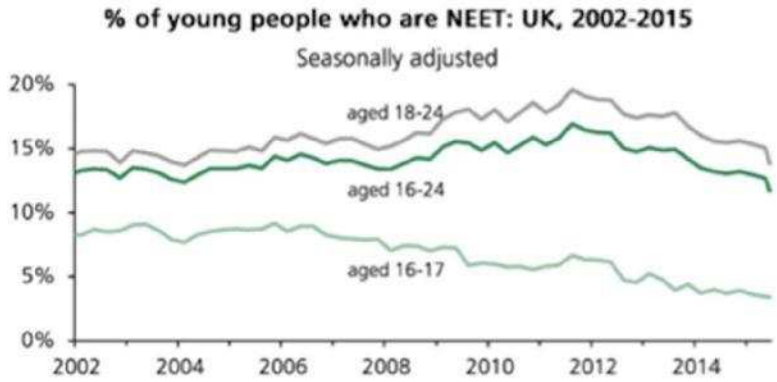


Delebarre, J (2015) NEET: Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training. House of Commons Briefing Paper no. 06705. www.parliament.uk/commons-library Accessed 15 February 2015)



Source: ONS, Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEE T), http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/lms/young-people-not-in-education--employment-ortraining--neets-/november-2015/index.html November 2015, and ONS, Labour Market Statistics, http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/lms/labour-market-statistics/november-2015/index.html

Not Just a number? NEETs, data and datalogical systems

This paper draws on empirical research with NEET populations (16-24 year olds not in education, employment or training) in order to engage with issues around identification, data and metrics produced through datalogical systems. Our aim is to bridge contemporary discourses around data, digital bureaucracy and datalogical systems with empirical material drawn from a longterm ethnographic project with NEET groups in Leeds, UK in order to highlight the way datalogical systems ideologically and politically shape peoples lives. Taken together, our research raises some pertinent questions about the politics of datalogical systems that are used to measure and capture experiences and activities of certain populations in particular ways and that generate normative and ideological behavioural standards and practices

Keywords: data, datalogical system, NEET, metrification

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Correspondence:
Helen Thornham
h .thornham@leeds .ac .uk
edgar .gomez@rmit .edu .au
2 .06 Clothworkers North
School of Media and Communication
University of Leeds,
LS2 9JT

Helen Thornham is an Associate Professor at the University of Leeds. She is involved in a number of research projects investigating practices in digital media that are funded by the EPSRC, ESRC and British Academy is the author of Ethnographies of the Videogame: Narrative, Gender and Praxis (2011) and co-editor of Renewing Feminisms (2013) and Content Cultures (2014) . Her research focuses on gender and technological mediations, data and digital inequalities, embodiment, youth, space, place, and communities.

Edgar Gómez Cruz is a Research Fellow at RMIT, Melbourne. He has published widely on a number of topics relating to digital culture, ethnography, and photography. His recent publications include From Kodak Culture to Networked Image. An Ethnography of Digital Photography Practices (2012) and Digital Photography and Everyday Life: Empirical Studies in Material Visual Practices (2016, with Asko Lehmuskallio) . Current research investigates screen cultures and creative practice, which is funded through RCUK and Vice Chancellor research grants.

Not Just a number?[i] NEETs, data and datalogical systems

Introduction

This paper draws on empirical research with NEET populations (16-24 year olds not in education, employment or training) in the UK in order to engage with issues around identification, data and metrics produced through datalogical systems. Our aim is to bridge contemporary discourses around data, digital bureaucracy and datalogical systems with empirical material drawn from a long-term ethnographic project with NEET groups in Leeds, UK. The paper draws on ethnographic material for richness and depth, and in this sense the ethnographic material is additional, rather than substantive to our argument. Similarly, although we focus on the UK, the project from which this empirical material is drawn is international and we find many comparison and resonances across the globe (see www.communitiesandcultre.org.uk). Indeed, our central concern is to address how populations — NEET or otherwise, national or international — are increasingly positioned by digital systems that make obfuscated decisions about them that have huge impact on their lives.

In what follows, we sketch an argument that firstly seeks to understand NEET as data and as having utility within datalogical systems before addressing the implications of this on the lives of NEETs and on the potential for disruption. We suggest that conceptualising NEETs as data, and as generated by datalogical systems reveals new insights into the ways that datalogical systems ideologically and politically shape peoples lives. Taken together, our research raises pertinent questions about the politics of datalogical systems that are used to measure and capture experiences and activities of demographics in particular ways and that through this also generate normative and ideological practices.

NEETs and Us

Our work with NEET groups was part of a wider UK and international research project that investigated the digital transformations of communities and culture.[ii] The empirical material represented in this article comes from one of six 'case studies' across the UK that engaged with the digital by default initiative — four of which focused on 'marginal' groups (rural, unemployed, NEET, aged). This means that our findings as whole emerge from across the six projects within this theme, although the examples are specific to our project. We worked with two NEET groups on a number of digital media projects that each spoke to different elements of the digital by default agenda in conjunction with two different third sector organisations in Leeds. The first organisation was Studio12,[iii] a media production facility for young people with disadvantaged backgrounds. Here we started with a broad and disparate group of walk-in

young adults who came into the studio to learn creative (usually music) digital skills. As the project developed, we began to work closely with three individuals (19-22yrs) on creative digital projects that detailed their experiences of being NEET.[iv] Our role here was primarily as participant observers, and we went to the studio every week for workshops and were engaged in an intensive filming schedule over 3 months of the summer of 2013. During this time we kept field notes, we recorded the summary discussions each day, we interviewed the participants, organizers and facilitators, and we analyzed the material they produced during their filming and discussed the material with them (interviews, script, photos, music). The second organization, Space2,[v] engages NEET individuals through a wider array of arts and creative methods. Here we worked with a group of 12 NEET individuals[vi] between the ages of 18-24 over a three-year period (2012-15) on a range of different digital and creative projects that each tool between 3 and 8 months. They created a film and a website about their experiences of being NEET, but they also wrote blogs and plays, interviewed councilors and job centre spokespeople, staged protests, and created voxpops and other forms of UGC. Here we were also participant observers, meeting the group every week to observe and talk to them about their projects. Each stage of the project started and finished with groups and individual interviews undertaken by the facilitators, but we also kept fieldnotes which we shared with the participants and facilitators, and recorded workshop sessions. We interviewed the facilitators, and recorded a reflective conversation with them each week; we discussed and analyzed the material produced by our participants with them each week.

The particular approach we used in our research can be encapsulated by Pink et al.'s (2015) concept of 'digital ethnography', which is situated in the politics and principles of reflexivity, participation, and observation but is also attuned to the (digital) mediatory elements of digital culture (2015, p.3). Underpinning this approach is, of course, a wider corpus of research that has used ethnographic methods to research everyday mediations and experiences, such as what Rose, Degen, and Basdas have called a 'walk-along method' (2010, p.340) - observing, interviewing, reflecting and asking our participants to do the same (see also Rose 2012, Walkerdine 2007, Horst & Miller 2012). This means that while the two projects explicitly detailed here have depth and richness, their significance (in terms of data) comes from their contribution to the wider project. The final caveat to note here is that although our central engagement with these groups is ethnographic, this paper is intended as a critical reflection on the politics of data and how datalogical systems have ideological, political and methodological implications we need to consider. While it emerges from ethnographic research then, the experiences recounted here are used as springboards for a critical discussion, which is the purpose of this paper.

NEETs as Data

The category of NEET is a contentious one across Europe (see Bynner and Parsons 2002, Inui 2005, Lunsing 2007) not least because it homogenizes a very disparate group of 14 million 'young people'[vii] across Europe (Bynner and Parsons 2002, Blake & Sutton-Hamilton 2015), but also because of the policy background (Maguire and Rennison 2005) which works to isolate and distinguish NEETs from other unemployed status and puts them perpetually 'at risk' or as 'high risk' (Yates and Payne 2006, Bynner and Parsons 2002). The category of NEET accounts for people aged between 16-24 who are not in employment, education or training, and perhaps most crucially distinguishes them from the broader category (and subsequent 'benefits') of being a 'job seeker'. NEETs 'may be young parents, have learning difficulties or disabilities, or a history of offending. They will already be receiving support from local services, but need a package of help aimed specifically at returning to work or learning.' (DFE 2010: 1). Other NEETs outside this categorisations may 'lack' aspiration, have 'behavioural issues' or an 'inability to travel independently', which variously positions them within this category (ibid.). In 2015, the NEET category constituted just under 60% of 'unemployed' 16-24 year olds in the UK (the remaining 40% are in educations or training and therefore not classed as NEET (Delebarre 2015: 3). The first issue to note here, of course, is that each of these signifiers for the NEET categorisation are generated through metrics — through particular algorithms that aggregate particular 'indexed' and 'attributable' data into powerful and meaningful categories (Kitchin 2014, p.115). As suggested by the Department for Education (DoE, 2010), the NEET category initially aggregates metrics such as age, educational qualifications (and duration of time within educational establishments), dependents, mental and physical disabilities, geographic location: NEET is a data aggregation, a metric, a quantification: it flattens and identifies several different specific/subjective identities and values them in particular ways. It is devised through a datalogical system of metrification and measurement, and it functions within and beyond the datalogical systems in which it is generated. The second issue is that the category of NEET — as data or as a data aggregation - has traction beyond the initial system of measurement: NEET is also a powerful data bundle(s) in other sophisticated systems: they feed into and generate new dynamic systems of measurement through the addition of other data (that can increasingly be gathered from a distance, as big data) (see Dodge and Kitchin 2005, p.857, Cheney-Lippold 2011, p.165). Again, as suggested by the DoE, the initial NEET data aggregation is further substantiated with 'bigger' data (such as that pertaining to mobility on a national and international scale, immigration statistics, gender, OECD data, ethnicity) and 'smaller' data (educational qualification, free school meals, marital status of parents, substance abuse) (Delebarre 2015, p4-11).

[insert graphs]

Positioned in this way, we need to understand the NEET categorisation as part of a wider discourse around big data as well as part of a long-term global trend towards metrification and bureaucratisation. Indeed, we can think of NEET as a particular regime of visibility, whereby certain populations are made visible within certain 'political technologies', and can generate meaning as long as they operate within those structures (see Foucault 1977, p.205). One way to acknowledge this is not only in relation to the category of NEET as data (which we return to below), but also in relation to the project itself - which is equally complicit in promoting and acknowledging the values, affordances and metrics that constitute the NEET categorisation. Indeed, the NEET status made our participants visible to the community organisations with whom we worked through their contact with job centres, schools and colleges, social workers. It was what enabled them to walk through the door of Studio 12 at a time when the workshops were running. In the case of Space2, NEET groups are identified by social services and educational establishments in the first instance: they are also highlighted to Space2 within a local data ecology through, for example Space2's own database that has deep knowledge of particular communities in Leeds (Seacroft, Gipton, Harehills). This local data ecology mapped onto bigger data through local council and job centre referrals, social worker or probation officer referrals (notably, through the 'Youth Contract', see Delabarre 2015, p.11). Within this system individuals are a name, and age and a geographic location: but their inclusion within the system is what signifies them as NEET. It was this status that made these demographics available in terms of the time and location of the workshops, in a way that was a recognised and meaningful activity by social workers and the job centre. It was what enabled them to undertake a range of qualifications whilst engaging in the project, and it was what enabled them to get childcare, travel tokens and food whilst at the workshops. Whilst some of these outcomes unevenly and indirectly relate to their identification as NEET, it is nevertheless this initial process of measurement and labelling that frames this entire process.

NEETs and Datalogical Systems

The process of categorising NEETs and indeed the process of including them on the research projects is generated by, what David Graeber has termed 'mechanical organization' (2015, p.164) - digital and technological bureaucratic systems whose purpose is to create and maintain 'social relations' (ibid. p.163, see also Cheney-Lippold 2011, p.l6'7). In the examples offered above, social relations are explicitly engineered through the metrics that constitute individuals as NEET. Once they agree to participate - either in our research project,

or indeed in other activities within the organisations, their status as NEET continues to frame conditions of engagement, modes of behaviour as well as the power relations between the NEET individual and the facilitators. It was really clear within the Studio12 project, for example, that participants were expected to be respectful, polite, to productively contribute: there were established rules of behaviour that were written along the organisational power relations. We could think of this in line with scholars such as Foucault (1977) or Althusser (1971), and in terms of processes of interpellation or self-disciplining. Seen here, NEET is also a form of, to draw on the work of Roger Burrows, 'quantified control' (2012, p.356) whereby metrification increasingly generates conditions of behaviour not necessarily in straightforward or transparent ways, but in terms of contributing to a structure that sustains these 'regimes of behaviour' through the establishment of an interrelated mesh of power relations in a digital bureaucratic ecology (e.g. creating the NEET category, creating the community arts organisations, systems of funding, metrics that recognise success). It was also clear that behaviour within a workshop was also measured, noted, counted in particular ways that fed back into wider datalogical systems.[viii] Unexplained absence, for example, was an easy metric that signified elsewhere (it was flagged to social workers or probation officers, it was taken up at the job centre in their weekly visit). Facilitators noted behaviour within the workshop, struggles with mental health issues, financial, or family difficulties. In other words, the workshops noted, and contributed to (but did not counter) the values and measurements of NEET data.

If the NEET category framed a range of social conditions, it is also important to note how the data generated within the workshops further 'disciplined' or conditioned NEET individuals, beyond the workshops themselves then. Indeed, an important point to note in this paper (and an issue we will return to) is that datalogical structures are dynamically adaptive — they are both in a constantly fluid state and adaptively responsive. They generate information and have the capacity to build in response to that information.[ix] They are self-referential and self-legitimating (partly because of the necessary obfuscation of the system see Berry 2014) and although the human element responds to the system, it responds to (through interaction with) the human environment (see Clough et al. 2015, p.7). This means not only that the datalogical structures and systems are self-referential and durable (to use Latour's term 1990); it also means that the frameworks for measurement and value are forged in the system 'itself' and increasingly, in the era of digital bureaucracy, impenetrable by human agents. This is less about metrification per se, then, but about how the datalogical systems are built along existing inequalities around who can input data, what data is valued or measured, how data is aggregated etc.

During the three years of the Space2 project, we had many instances where data generated by a range of powerful agents (including Space2, but also job centre employees, social workers, youth workers etc) produced decisions that impacted on the NEET individuals in terms of sanctions, dis/enrollments on training schemes or apprenticeships, home visits etc. In one of the more extreme cases, one woman had her two young children taken from her and put into social care. The decision behind this process was based on aggregated data inputted into the datalogical system by a range of organisations and people within a local data ecology. While a range of organizations and individuals (Space 2, her social worker, her youth worker) attempted to intervene on her behalf, it was clear that the decision was one that was firmly located in the datalogical system itself: it was impenetrable, unquestionable and unimpeachable. The important issue for the purposes of this article, then, is how little (human) resistance or intervention is possible— either for those supposedly in a position of power within the system (social workers, community arts workers, youth workers) or those subjected by it (the NEETs themselves).

The point in recounting this is to indicate that even though we often discuss data and datalogical systems in abstract ways that render them relatively benign, it does not take much empirical work to unpack the power dynamics at play here. Indeed if we consider the wider discursive construction of both data and datalogical systems, this argument is further substantiated. As noted at the start of this article, there has been a wider shift in contemporary culture towards data, big data and open data and many scholars have critiqued the popular discursive construction of data as 'a priori' to information, bias, value (Drucker 2011, p.1) that is reiterated in an era of big data and digital bureaucratic systems (Graeber 2015). The powerful discursive construct is that data is 'fact' (Gitelman & Jackson 2013, p.6), 'self-evident', 'the fundamental stuff of truth itself' (ibid. p.2), when it is actually interpretive, constructed within existing power relations, and relative (see also boyd and Crawford 2012, Mayer-Schönberger & Crukier 2013, Dodge and Kitchin 2005). This means, in a similar vein to contemporary arguments around big data and predictive analysis (see van Dijck 2013, Kennedy et al 2015, Andrejevic 2011), complying with systems of measurements that may feel benign or unconnected, or making visible certain discrete activities or actions actually have broader political, social and ideological consequences that we need to critically consider.

Furthermore, when we add the discursive construct of data to wider constructions of smart systems, we have a double convolution of transparent and truthful data within a system that is conceived of as 'anticipatory' (Berry 2014), 'dynamic' (van Dijck 2013), 'networked' (boyd 2014): as 'smart' (Shepard 2011). These are all terms that seek to elucidate the way that decision-making processes are increasingly automated within datalogical systems that are also

normatively being accepted as illegible (see also Webster 2014, p.244; Berry 2014, p.14). Of course, as Graeber reminds us, this is not in and of itself new, but should be seen as part of a long term trend towards digital bureaucratization (2015, p.150, see also Strathern 2000). What has shifted in recent years is the discursive value of the data-driven system: the trust in data, big data and datalogical systems over other metrics, and the increasing digitalisation of existing bureaucratic systems that render those systems even more impenetrable and inscrutable (see also Mayer-Schönberger & Crukier 2013:78). Taken together, this adds to the impenetrability of the system, and further constructs the automated decisions of that system as beyond reprehension or interrogation, positioning all human agents (not just the NEETs) if not subject to, and positioned by, the datalogical system, then at least as less agential or powerful than the system. Ultimately then, we may talk about machine learning or dynamic systems in relatively benign ways - as smart systems that 'iteratively evolve' a dataset (Kitchin 2014, p.103) to 'predict' and 'optimise outcomes' (Han et al. 2011). But when these outcomes are located in everyday power dynamics and experiences, their benign quality becomes increasingly difficult to sustain.

NEETs as neoliberal self-disciplining and responsible subjects

If the sections above elucidate how the category of NEET operates within a wider dataological system that is both big (data) and small (data), here we want to explore the materialisation of this in discursive and everyday encounters. This is partly to expand on the concept of a 'disciplined' or 'quantified' subject (Foucault 1977, Burrows 2012), but it is also to note that the ideological and discursive construction of data as noted above, resonate well beyond the datalogical systems to which they refer — into everyday encounters and value systems. Indeed, many scholars have highlighted how the disciplinary effects of the regimes and datalogical systems have gained traction producing, amongst other things, a positive discourse around safety, individual responsibility and surveillance (see Holmwood 2010, 2011, Strathern 2000, Dodge & Kitchen 2005). As Burrows notes, in a digital bureaucratic system, part of the rationale for this has been a broader shift from regimes of trust, to those of accountability (Burrows 2012, p.357) and in terms of the NEET individuals, we see this rhetoric materialise in a number of ways.

On the one hand the discursive implications of NEET as data position the NEET individuals as within (but not agents of) the systems that subject them. NEET underpins (but does not necessarily critique) existing discourses on (for example) youth culture.[x] Seen here, the quantification of the category of NEET is equally important as underpinning discursive trope, as it is a powerful data aggregation. NEET overlays the discursive categories of youth - as a 'liminal' and 'transitional' (see Hodkinson 2007, Bennett 2007, Buckingham 2002, Maguire

and Rennison 2005) - with discourses of disadvantage and neoliberalism (for example), to conceptually promote the idea of NEET in increasingly negative terms - as `conceptually connected to a locus of disadvantage' (Yates & Payne: 2006, p.330), but also conversely as ultimately responsible for their own NEET status.

The most visible example of this double convolution is perhaps around the contemporary notion of the `benefit cheat' in the UK, perhaps exacerbated somewhat by reality television dramas such as Benefit Street (Ch4 2014), which we discussed with the NEET participants during the workshops. The popular notion of the benefit cheat is underpinned by wider policy changes in the UK around universal credit and housing benefit[xi] and through government campaigns urging people to `do the right thing' and using the language of `benefit cheats'[xii]. It not only makes NEET and unemployed status highly visible in the popular and policy imaginary, it is also embroiled in a language of individualism, responsibility and accountability which positions those on benefits as not only responsible for their own social status, but as `playing' the system for self-serving purposes. This sense of accountability that was used as critique of NEETs became visible to us during the research through the everyday experiences the workshop participants recounted: taxi driver who made a point of criticizing them for coming to the workshop on `account' (paid for by Space2 or Studiol2); shop keepers, who commented on the quality of food the NEETs were buying or on how much they were spending; bus drivers who refused to `recognise' the token systems utilized by the community organization in conjunction with Leeds council and the travel companies (who made the NEETs pay cash); café workers who commented on their presence. Every week, it seemed that each individual had experienced something that subjected him or her to particular power relations, rendering them (justifiably) upset, hostile and angry as a consequence:

> `she [the taxi driver] told me I was taking the piss and that if I could afford a fancy new phone I must be earning somehow'
>
> `He [shop worker] wouldn't serve me. He looked right through me. He said I was being `ignorant' coz I was messenging. He was like 'nice phone' you know, like knowingly.'
>
> `She [shop worker] was totting up all the things I was buying and then looking me up and down like `how could I afford this?'
>
> `She [shop worker] was like `ooh you're eating well tonight'. What a bitch.'
>
> `He [bus driver] told me that if I was going all the way across Leeds I should pay for it myself.'

> 'She [woman in the street] was like, 'oooh it's alright for some'. Like just because I'm on benefits I should be shopping in Primark or something' [on her 3 year old dressed in a 'Gap' sweater]
>
> 'I might as well have a big fucking sign on my head'

While the quotes cited here are suggestive of perceptions of everyday encounters (they are very subjective) they nevertheless highlight a number of pertinent issues: the visible status of NEET as an identity category; the way other signifiers (mobile phones, amount of money, mobility across the city) frame interpretation of their status; the general hostility by people who are perceived as more powerful by the NEETs; the range and scope of such reactions; or the mundane and everyday nature of them.[xiii]

For the purposes of this article, however, there are two issues we want to specifically note here. The first is to relate the discussions around NEET as data to these discursive encounters to suggest that we need to acknowledge the way datalogical systems are giving these discursive encounters more visibility (to the NEETs themselves and to us). At the same time, the workshop participants were also recounting very familiar instances here which eludes to the wider popular discourses of youth culture as well as more contemporary discourses of NEETs as visible populations (see also Hodkinson 200'7, Buckingham 2002, Livingstone 2009). In other words, these extracts highlight a complex enmeshing of a range of datalogical and discursive, digital and everyday issues. At the same time, and as noted above, what has shifted in recent years is the discursive valuing of the data-driven systems that enable them to underpin wider popular discourse in new ways. Seen here, trust in data, in datalogical systems, in wider digital bureaucratic systems confirms normative and discursive opinion and has resulted in and easy elision between normative consensus and the values of the datalogical system (see also Berry 2014, p.14, Mayer-Schönberger & Crukier 2013, p.'78). Or, to offer a more forceful interpretation: the values of the datalogical systems that have become widely normative. Indeed as Cheney-Lippold has argued, one of the notable changes in a digital era is the way that 'algorithmic identities' have been seemingly constituted at a distance from politics — formed in the datalogical systems via metrics, rather than overtly within systems of governance. For Cheney-Lippold, this convolution means that algorithmic identities (another way to think of the NEET categorisation) seem to have been 'removed from civil discourse via the proprietary nature of many algorithms' (2011, p.165) when in fact the converse is true. The convolution enables an 'unprecedented ubiquity' in terms the reach and power of the system 'to surveil and record data about users', while masking this in an apolitical and benign claim around data as transparent, unbiased and fact (ibid.).

The second issue is to locate the discursive encounters more firmly within wider neoliberal policies of accountability and responsibility (see Burrows 2012) through specific recourse to the digital by default agenda in the UK.[xiv] This agenda resonates across Europe[xv] and aims to move all public service delivery online to create a single portal for government digital services. The objective in the UK is to achieve 'efficiency' and 'cost-effectiveness' in the delivery of public services in the digital age and to initiate a new mode of interaction and communication with the public. The government is using a number of illustrative examples to make a (positive) case that the digital by default initiative enables users to take more 'responsibility' for their wellbeing in alignment with the 'Big Society' vision of the last coalition government. [xvi] It employs a language of individualism, accountability and responsibility, and uses a commercial model of service provision that constructs the user as a consumer of the system (see also [project reports]. While we don't have the scope here to enter into a deeper discussion of this initiative ([see project reports], what is notable for the purposes of this article is the way the initiative collapses together the discourses and structures of datalogical systems discussed here, with 'infrastructures of contemporary capitalism' (Burrows & Savage 2014, see also Gane 2012) that also to an extent 'mimic' the market in terms of the construction of the user of the system as both a consumer and a user (see also Burrows 2012, p.357).

Indeed, as many scholars have noted (Holmwood 2010, 2011, Strathern 2000, Dodge & Kitchen 2005) we should see the shifting of responsibility and accountability onto the individual as part of a longer neoliberal process that has filtered through both policy and popular discourse (see also Bunyan 2012, Garrett 2009). Ken Jones (2011) has noted, for example, the steady proliferation of neoliberal ideologies since the New Labour government (1997-2010) that have experiences a revival across a range of sectors including welfare, education, employment (2011, p.81). What was notable from our project and the wider UK wide research in which the project also figured (see [website], however was howtransparently this discourse of accountability was critiqued as an overt mask for the withdrawal of welfare and state provision and a dodging of governmental responsibility through the expectation that community initiatives will replace the welfare state (see [project reports]).

NEETs and waste data

The final point we want to make in this article in relation to NEET as datalogical, is that 'visibility' within the data-driven systems is valued very unevenly. It is, as Kitchin suggests, the 'variables that have the most utility' that are the most visible (2014, p.101). Data 'depend on hierarchy' (Gitelman & Jackson 2013, p.8); they are 'correlated' in particular ways to

construct particular value (Mayer-Schönberger & Crukier 2013, p.70). This means, as we have discussed above, that in the operationalization of the NEET category, certain values and measurements signify more than others. More significant here and following this, as Bucher argues (2012), is that in a system of visibility and value, it actually the threat of 'invisibility' that becomes the powerful and generative force, not least because it renders non-valuable (in terms of the logics of the system) action and intervention immeasurable, insignificant and obsolete (2012, p.1171). Indeed, as we shall see below, immeasurable actions or values within particular data-driven and digital systems subject the NEET groups to particular decisions of the digital system that shape how they live. Job applications that do not utilise the appropriate digital platform; communication with social workers or parole officers that is not conducted through the required process; changes in habitation or employment status that are not logged appropriately all become invisible, non-accountable. These actions become 'waste' or 'raw' data — unaccountable, unvalued or invisible information, that usually result in the NEET individual getting sanctioned.

These issues constantly emerged during workshop sessions, when NEET individuals recounted their frustration with powerful agents within the various systems that actively constituted them as NEET. Here, the overt power relations were always recognised but what was noticeable from the discussions, was the technology and the datalogical system was understood as being positioned within these power structures. If we take a common example: The participants in our projects attended weekly sessions at the Job Centre where they were held accountable for their job applications each week. Each individual had to apply for between 8-15 jobs a week depending on a range of metrics (previous successes, employment history, length of time out of work, dependents etc), and each week their applications were logged and discussed. This in itself understands the process of job seeking, and the support for job seeking in particular ways, but the major issue for the purposes of this paper, was when NEET individuals did not utilise the required job centre platform for applications. The participants of our projects rarely used the job centre platform for job application because the majority of them did not have access to a PC or laptop (use within public libraries is limited to 10-15 minutes, libraries themselves have different opening times because of funding cuts and changes to staffing). Similarly, although the job centre does have a mobile app, our participants told us it was not useable because it often lost applications midway through the process, it was clunky and difficult to navigate, the search criteria was different, and it didn't have the most recent jobs. This meant that mobile job seeking apps like Monster, Ladders, or Switch were preferred. On the one hand, this should make no difference to the process of job hunting: the Job Centre should note any application on any app or platform. In practice

however, only job applications made through the Job Centres own portals were easily and automatically logged by the datalogical system:

> C.'s supervisor told her there was no record of her applying for jobs that week, so she would be sanctioned. C. told her supervisor she had applied for jobs on Monster on her phone. Her supervisor told her it was 'bad practice' to use her phone to apply for jobs. C. told her supervisor it might be 'bad practice' but it was legal. The supervisor told C. to stop being rude or she'd be sanctioned. Her supervisor told C. she should use a PC and if necessary come back to the job centre every day, which would demonstrate her commitment to finding employment. When C. pulled out her phone to show supervisor her job applications on Monster, her supervisor said 'can't you read the notice, no mobile phones in here' and sanctioned her for behaviour: C. sanctioned for 3 months.

In the extract above — taken from our fieldnotes - the values and metrics of the datalogical system unevenly filter through a range of other discourses and discussions. On the one hand a job seeker can use any app to apply for a job, but on the other hand mobile phones within job centres are not permitted. In the end, C. was sanctioned, not overtly because her applications were invalid, but because of her behaviour during the (social, cultural and data) encounter. Her behaviour was turned into (particular) data within a system in which she was multiply subjected. She cannot input data; she is positioned by the data; she is held accountable for that data, but has little agency over the constitution of data. At the same time, none of her applications that week were logged into the system — which would have required a different discussion with her supervisor than the one recounted here: one that followed the programmed script during job centre encounters. The fact this script was not followed, or that her job applications were not looked at, also means pretty definitively (but of course not absolutely) that her jobs were not logged that week. This constructs a different digital 'narrative' of the encounter that the one offered by C. during our workshop.

If we consider this example in terms of 'waste' or raw data, and the subsequent digital 'narrative', then a number of issues are notable. First, C. did not apply for her quota of jobs. No data was inputted into the system in relation to this - although her behaviour was noted which means she is 'counted' here as an absence (of job searches) and a presence (of 'poor' behaviour). Indeed as Bowker suggests, if it 'is not being measured, it doesn't exist' (Bowker 2013, p.170) — and this is a pertinent reminder of the power of the datalogical system that needs inputted information for decision making processes. This means that data is generative and has traction beyond the initial system of measurement (as we saw in previous sections). It

also means that, as Bucher notes (2012) data also create 'silences' (Bowker 2005, p.11-12) as well as the 'absences of relations' (Kitchin 2014b, p.22, see also Vis 2013), which are also meaningful in the system. Indeed, to put it crudely, as Gitelman and Jackson remind us, if we have 'other' data, 'one would come to different arguments and conclusions' (Gitelman & Jackson 2013, p.'7).

More than this, though, is the fact that any possibility that C. did apply for jobs is removed from the explanation of the algorithmic decision making processes. By comparison with the 'clean' data that is automatically generated through a job search on the registered platform, the 'raw' data needs sorting, translating and inputting by a human agent who is, when set against these discursive signifiers of big data and datalogical systems, conceived as slower, less dynamic, less neutral or objective than the system (see also Pybus et al. 2015, Kennedy et al. 2015). Taken together, this means not only that C. did not apply for her job quota according to the datalogical system; it also means than any suggestion to the contrary is found in the human explanations of the encounter. At the same time, and as we have been arguing throughout this paper, as our faith in the 'neutrality', 'autonomy' and 'objectivity' of data (Gitelman & Jackson 2013, p.2) grows, our faith in the human is diminishing (see also Clough 2015) so that this is not simply a matter of two alternative explanations for an encounter. Instead there is already an uneven value at work here that is locating agency and power within the digital system.

Datalogical Systems and Us

This article has argued that conceptualising NEETs as data, and as generated by datalogical systems reveals new insights into the ways that datalogical systems ideologically and politically shape peoples lives. Such systems are far from benign, and when considered within contemporary political — and global - shifts — such as those encapsulated by the digital by default agenda, or those highlighted by the discourses of 'big data' — reveal tangible power relations that hugely effect peoples lives.

At the same time, the issues discussed in this article are also revealed to be part of a long-term trend towards (digital) bureaucratisation, neoliberalism, and individualism and the article has sought to reveal this by locating what can be quite abstract discussions of data and datalogical systems within empirical material and everyday experiences. Seen here, the relevance of NEETs for this paper is that as data, and in a similar vein to other identity categories that carry political or ideological weight (we might think of age, class, geography, immigration categories etc) NEET is enacted through different systems (datalogical, social, cultural, political) that are each variously entwined with the datalogical. On the one hand this is not

new, but what has shifted in recent years, and as we have noted throughout this article is the value of the data-driven system: the trust in data as neutral and a priori to fact; the trust in datalogical systems as objective decision making processes that are better informed and increasingly predictive (particularly in the advent of big data); and the increasingly digitalisation of bureaucratic systems that are increasingly impenetrable and inscrutable.

Taken together, and as many scholars cited in this article have noted, this adds to the impenetrability of the system, and raises pertinent issues around our ability to question, interrogate or intervene into these systems. But the final issue to consider here relates to what this means more specifically for us as digital researchers, who are both positioned by these processes and systems, but have also been complicit in such systems for some time. Indeed data, big data and datalogical systems are 'an established presence in our everyday cultural lives' (Beer 2015, p.2) and, as we argued earlier in this article, if we are to critique the politics of data and datological systems, we also need to recognise how we are also implicated into a politics we purport to critique through our methods. In the context of this article, these politics emerged in the decisions about demographics and how they were constituted, as well as through conceptual alignments with the category of NEET that is equally operationalized (not always with critique) in datalogical systems and wider research. Indeed, as Clough et al. have noted, 'the datalogical has always haunted the sociological project' (2015, p.4).

Continuing this line of thought, researchers also promote certain identity signifiers that aggregate and afford particular value in the pursuit of 'representative' or meaningful research and this means to a certain extent that the processes critiqued in relation to big data and datalogical systems where the 'variables that have the most utility' (Kitchen 2014, p.101) are those most valued, are precisely those we are also employing in our own epistemological and ontological pursuits. Similarly, just as big data works to efface or obscure the power relations behind these processes of aggregation, so we write out these politics in our narration of the events: and it is precisely this process that has prompted the wider discussion of the 'crisis' for empirical research (Burrows and Savage 2014, Clough 2015, Clough et al. 2015 see also Bassett 2016, Sterne 2015).

In the end, then, the politics of data that are revealed here as having much wider resonance beyond a datalogical system, demand that we also consider and question our own roles in the long-term normative constitution of data. This is necessary if we are to move beyond a simple acknowledgment that datalogical systems and values are normatively shaping social and discursive experiences, and instead seek interventions that move us beyond our own

complicity in being primarily and ultimately reconfigured through the values of that datalogical system.

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[i] 'Not just a Number' is the title borrowed from a film of the same name we made with one of the NEET groups at a half way point of the project with them exploring the impact of the governments digital by default initiatives on their lives.

[ii] See [project website plus links to findings and reports for all case studies]

[iii] http://www.studio12.org.uk

[iv] http://www.studio12.org.uk/index.php/writing-britain/

[v] www.space2.org.uk

[vi] This number was not static as people moved in and out of employment over the three years. The minimum number at any one point was 5, and the maximum was 12. Individuals returned to the group frequently over the three years, but we had an iterative cycle where new members could join every 3-6 months.

[vii] http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/young-people-and-neets-1 (accessed 12.12.16)

[viii] And we might think about this in relation to metrics of success, or the way accountability is also figured for the organisations who have to measure and input data that pertains to their 'success'.

[ix] One of the ways this is popularly understood is in relation to the 'computer says no' phenomenon captured, for example, in Little Britain comedy sketches. See for examples https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJO3TM-p2OI

[x] This is unsurprising given the overlap of the categories of NEET and youth as suggested by Delebarre 2015.

[xi] see https://www.gov.uk/universal-credit/overview and https://www.gov.uk/housing-benefit/what-youll-get (10 February 2016),

[xii] See for example the 2014 campaign: https://www.gov.uk/dotherightthing, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NKAPGpuM848 (15 February 2016)

[xiii] see [research reports] for broader discussion of these issues

[xiv] Cabinet Office (2012) 'Government Digital Strategy' https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/296336/Government_Digital_Stratetegy_-_November_2012.pdf. See Government Digital Service (2015) 'How Digital and Technology Transformation Saved L1.7bn Last Year' https://gds.blog.gov.uk/2015/10/23/how-digital-andtechnology-transformation-saved-1-7bn-last-year/

[xv] https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/eu-egovernment-report-2016-shows-online-public-services-improved-unevenly (accessed 12.12.16)

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