

# Reflection: ‘Spilling the Authorship Tea’ – On Herding Cats and Collective Response-ability

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## Introduction

The aim of this book was to facilitate dialogue between scholars in critical data studies across different disciplines, locations, and levels of seniority. This presents a collective (and alternative) approach to knowledge-making and dissemination to more standard contemporary models (Peters et al, 2016; Jandrić et al, 2023). It is, however, also a ‘continuous struggle for meaning-making’ (Jandrić et al, 2023: 249). For example, in reflecting on their experience of collective writing, Jandrić et al report that it ‘took a leap of faith’ when they contributed to their first collective paper. They also had so many questions: ‘What does it mean to write together? How can we combine people’s diverse ideas and strands of thinking into a coherent whole?’

We (Juliane and Jo) began this book project with similar questions. Leading a book project that kicked off with 78 academic authors across 50 author teams, of varying years’ experience based in 14 countries across different time zones was unsurprisingly challenging! When we met up with our editor Paul at STS Graz in early May 2023, as we got towards the end of our initial round of workshops and authors were working on their chapters, Paul asked us ‘Would you do it again?’. It was a difficult question to answer at that stage, things had gone relatively smoothly so far, but we were still unsure what was in store for us as the chapters came together. Now as the project draws to a close and we reflect on our work on it over the last 12 months, Jo overall has been pleasantly surprised it was not as difficult as it might have been to get all the chapters to the finish line, and would consider doing it again (keeping in mind some important lessons learned). Julianne’s curiosity to explore how such an approach would advance dialogues and engagement in critical data studies was her initial starting point. At times she felt that she underestimated the work of ‘herding cats’ and ‘building narratives’ (Jandrić

et al, 2023), but realized in the end the great potential of such an approach for collective knowledge-making and for building stronger ties among critical data studies scholars. In this chapter, Jo Bates and Juliane Jarke, the editors of this book, report and reflect on the collective writing process of this book together with some of its authors.

## **The collective writing process**

Data Power was organized as a three-day in-person and online international conference in June 2022 by Data Power teams at The University of Sheffield in the UK, Carleton University in Canada, and the University of Bremen in Germany. Overall, 175 participants presented 122 research papers. In the months following the conference, we began to make plans for a book project emerging from the conference that would further support and enable dialogue across locations, disciplines, and career levels. Juliane had had an early conversation with Paul Stevens, our editor at Bristol University Press, about her ideas for a collaboratively authored book project which he was excited to support. From there Juliane brought the idea to the Data Power team, and convinced Jo to join the project as a co-editor.

We kicked off the project by exploring possible chapter themes with Tracey Lauriault, who had hosted the Ottawa stream of the 2022 conference. Some of these themes were based directly on the panels that were constructed for the conference, others were new formations of contributors it was possible to bring together, freed from the constraints of time zones and modes of participation as we were when constructing the conference programme. The ‘Environmental Data Power’ chapter was one such theme. This process of crafting emergent themes from the conference was clearly a subjective process, driven by our own insights and desires for where we would like to foster new conversations and collaboration on pressing topics. Once we had a list of thematic chapters and potential authors for each, we split the chapters between the two editors so we were leading on four each. In addition, we invited the keynote panel from Bremen, who had already engaged in an interdisciplinary dialogue for a conference keynote, to contribute a chapter on their approach of collective sensemaking and dialogue across data science, software engineering, law, philosophy, and science and technology studies. In November 2022, five months after the conference, we began sending invitations out to selected authors – around 5–8 per chapter. Given the novel approach of the writing project, we were unsure how people would respond, however, we soon received positive responses from most of the invitees, and began scheduling dates for chapter workshops in the new year.

Our first workshop was held in February 2023. Every participant was asked to prepare a 5 to 7 minute provocation in relation to the theme of the workshop in order to introduce themselves to the others and embark on a

first exploration and mapping of the different perspectives that participants brought to the theme. We gave a brief introduction to the idea of the book and how we envisaged the writing process would take shape. This first workshop went well and so we kept the format for the kick-off workshops with the other chapters. The remaining chapter workshops took place in March and April. In all workshops, the workshop participants were asked to introduce themselves and their research through a short provocation. In order to do so, some used their slides from the Data Power Conference, others spoke about what they were interested in or concerned about in relation to the theme we set out. It quickly became clear that each author team had its own dynamics. What we learned from running one workshop was not necessarily useful in the next. We found that depending on the thematic focus of the chapter, participants seemed to find it easier or more difficult to pin down or frame a common ground (and some boundaries) for their endeavour. Some groups developed an argument and structure for their chapter with ease, outlining where each section/perspective of individual authors would go; others found that quite challenging. Some groups took up on our initial title of the chapter; others challenged our framing and developed it further. Some groups fairly seamlessly evolved their own collaborative approach, while others needed more steering. Some groups fostered a somewhat non-hierarchical approach, others had more dominant personalities who had more to say about the direction of travel. Groups also differed with respect to how they approached their chapter, for example, was it a good starting point to consider the most relevant concepts and controversies or was it better to think about what the authors wanted the readers to take away. These seemingly subtle differences had an impact on how 'dialogical' the chapters were written. Our role oscillated between being a moderator in a dialogue or panel and being an editor that needed to help develop a written (and for others sensible) account of the dialogue.

Despite the different cultural dynamics of each author collective, over the coming months they all made headway in writing their chapters. While follow-up workshops were held for some groups, that was challenging for some chapters where authors had busy schedules and were spread across different time zones, so authors often worked asynchronously on chapters using Google Docs, usually with separate documents for draft chapters and meeting notes. Each author contributed a section to the paper, and volunteers from the team were sought to contribute to framing the chapter in the introduction and conclusion. While there was a somewhat standard length for each individual section, author teams then decided their own approach to constructing an introduction and conclusion that worked for the contribution they were trying to make. Some also decided that they wanted to add positionality statements to their chapters. Discussions also took place to decide the order of the sections and how this contributed to

the overarching narrative. As with the other components of the chapters, this was easier for some groups than others with some needing more editorial support than others.

As the chapters were taking shape, with input from author teams, we began drawing up shortlists of discussants for each chapter. Initially, we had planned to do these sections as transparent chapter reviews published after each chapter, but after some discussion with the publishers we opted for a ‘safer’ option of inviting discussants to contribute a section, taking on a similar role to a discussant on a conference panel. Overall, what was important to us was that we would further open the dialogue and involve scholars from outside the Data Power Conference community. We aimed for a mix of leading academics in the field and earlier career researchers to fulfil these roles, with 1–2 discussants per chapter. Over summer 2023, chapters were sent to selected discussants. When the responses came back, many of the author collectives appreciated the (critical) engagement with their chapter. Some decided to provide a response to the discussant sections either as individual contributors or collective statements, others were happy for the discussant to conclude the dialogue.

Specific challenges we encountered, and which we think are likely to crop up if we – or others – ran a similar project in the future, included the variability in commitment that people were able to offer, which impacted some people’s capacity to keep to deadlines or volunteer for the extra work of contributing to a chapter introduction or conclusion once their section was complete. Across the chapters a small number of researchers dropped out due to over commitment and personal issues, sometimes resulting in a leadership vacuum in a chapter, meaning more input for editors. Most of these people communicated openly about their challenges, keeping us in the loop; others disappeared leaving us uncertain about their contribution. Personality and power dynamics also came into play. For example, some authors were reluctant to comment on one another’s sections, while others were keen to do so, and there were sometimes group dynamics to manage as established academics took the lead in shaping the narrative of the chapter in line with their own perspective. As discussed above, different author groups took different approaches to the collaboration, and in some cases where the approach was more individualized this made it challenging to overcome a level of fragmentation in the narrative of the [final chapter](#).

Despite the challenges, what worked well was the sense of collegiality and connection that emerged to varying degrees around each chapter. From the initial workshop through multiple emails and comments in Google Docs, connections were built that would not have happened otherwise, including between early career researchers and more established academics in the field. Being in the critical data studies field can mean you are a border

hopper – with feet in different disciplinary spaces, so there is not always the opportunity to build these connections as one might in a more traditional disciplinary formation. The writing of the book hopefully provided a space for this for some of our contributors.

So, on reflection what do we think is the glue that makes such a process successful despite the challenges? Through our discussions we came to the conclusion that trust and collective response-ability were at the core of our process, from those initial moments when Juliane suggested the project, and Jo – despite feeling uncertain about what it would entail – trusted in her vision of collective knowledge production and dialogic engagement, through to the final product in which we trusted the readers to be open to what was presented to them. As Linnet Taylor comments in [Chapter 9](#), ‘For CDS, the use of the terminology of “trust” is a reliable sign that something is getting interestingly out of control’, and we would agree that for a project such as this to work some element of control has to be lost, with trust – in the people, process, and vision – taking its place. As editors we trusted in one another, as well as the invited authors and discussants, to stay committed, communicative, constructive, and collegial. We also trusted in the process of collective writing to deliver tangible, engaging results. For everyone else that was involved there were likely also moments of uncertainty and a sense of things being ‘interestingly out of control’, when they leaned on their trust in their author and editorial teams to produce the chapters. This seems to be a general insight into collective writing as [Jandrić et al \(2023\)](#) similarly reflect on a ‘leap of faith’ that was necessary when embarking on such an endeavour.

Ultimately, then, what we were all trusting was other contributors’ response-ability to one another and the project. To return to the theme introduced at the beginning of the book, this meant that people ‘show up’ for one another and ‘stay with the trouble’ ([Haraway, 2016](#)). For all those involved in this book this meant shifting somewhat beyond contemporary modes of authorship in neoliberal academic publishing, which largely tend to prioritize responsibility to self and one’s subjects, and instead to engage our ‘ability to respond, to respond to the world beyond oneself, as well as a willingness to recognize its existence’ ([Kuokkanen, 2010: 39](#)). That is, a collective writing project such as this involves a response-ability for all to listen and respond to others within the group, with the intention of this project of cultivating and fostering a culture of mutual support and dialogue within the field of critical data studies. While CDS may rightly question the call to trust those that leverage data power on behalf of capitalism, we also need to foster trust and response-ability among those that in their various ways aim to counter it. Across the different chapter teams we saw traces of this response-ability beginning to take root, and our hope is that some seeds have been sown for future collaborations.

In the spirit of response-ability, here we share two responses to our reflection from authors involved in the project:

*Pat Brodie (environmental data power):* While I surprisingly found myself in a leading role in crafting our chapter, the guidance of Jo and the collegiality and openness of my co-authors, in spite of varying geographies, commitments, and career orientations, made the experience a nourishing one. I think our collaboration, across varied approaches but aligned by a commitment to environmental data *justice*, has together made a valuable argument about the role of critical research in crafting alternative pathways for understanding and employing environmental data power.

*Karen Louise Smith with input from the chapter author team:* The concept of response-ability related to the collaborative writing practices that underpin this book truly resonates with me. For much of my academic life, I have doodled in the margins of my notebook as I listen to lectures and presentations. For this book, my doodle from an initial meeting became a sketchnote which via ongoing dialogue with my co-authors turned into an annotated figure. Our braid image conveys the intent of our collaboration, built on concepts like data assemblages (Kitchin, 2014; Selwyn, 2021) and data futures (Dourish and Gómez Cruz, 2018; Ruppert, 2018).

The story behind the braid image thus demonstrates how we worked together to respond to the existing literature in critical data studies, the scholarship of the Data Power community, and finally the empirical and theoretical ideas of our co-authors through a collaborative sensemaking and writing process.

To conclude, Jo and Juliane are immensely grateful to Bristol University Press, the authors and discussants of this book to put their trust in us, and experiment with a way of doing academic response-ability and dialogue otherwise.

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