

The datafication of anti-trafficking: border securitization, automation, and the politics of 'rescue'

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Abstract

Exploring key instances of data-driven anti-trafficking border work, this presentation examines the emergence of an anti-trafficking surveillant assemblage built around a politics of 'rescue' that frequently harms precisely those people and communities identified to be in need of saving. Anti-trafficking plays an increasingly significant role both in providing ideological justification for the hardening and securitizing of borders, and as the site of research and development for the use of data-based and automated or machine learning ('AI') bordering systems. Tools include everything from social media surveillance to the use of Natural Language Processing or biometric face recognition, with anti-trafficking tools and practices also simultaneously targeting migrant and domestic workers. These interventions target sex workers in particular. Anti-trafficking technological development mobilizes a range of actors, including state agencies, academic researchers, corporations, and NGOs, with developments in the US especially influential. Following the lead of migrant- and sex worker-led critical data activism, this presentation investigates how data-based systems encode a range of inequities, reinforce capitalist and neo-colonial border practices, and facilitate increasingly militarized and police-driven border security regimes. Key examples include the DARPA-led Memex, Tech Against Trafficking initiatives, or the Counter-trafficking Data Collaborative. Of special interest is how anti-trafficking enlists a wide range of workers and citizens as participants in the data-driven anti-trafficking assemblage.

Biography

Rob Heynen is Associate Professor in the Department of Communication & Media Studies at York University. His current work is broadly in the field of surveillance studies, engaging with race, gender, capitalism, and borders, and specifically is leading a research project on biometrics and is part of two collaborative critical anti-trafficking projects. He is the co-editor of two books on surveillance, *Making Surveillance States: Transnational Histories* (University of Toronto Press, 2019) and *Expanding the Gaze: Gender and the Politics of Surveillance* (University of Toronto Press, 2016).