

Complex Big Data: The road to bad policy?

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Plan

- Intro to approach to big data policy
- 5 issues
- Conclusions

Note

- Many issues here are not specific to Big Data
- Many issues here are not specific to policy
- But...
- The speed and the legitimacy of big data, especially given Government expenditure and growing reliance on big data, means that we need to move quickly to: a) consider the issues and b) provide some real alternatives.
- This talk is about a) but together we need to work through b)

Both big data and policy
assume the world can be
changed.

But...

Big data does not assume a particular theory of change, even though it is assumed to be transformative.

Linear modelling often used
with big data is incongruent to
a world where cause is case
based, complex, nonlinear and
equifinal.

Big data for policy planning
and evaluation needs to
assume complexity.

5 issues

1. Methodologically, big data has a number of problems...

1. Causality at the level of cause and meaning
2. Sampling
3. Measurement
4. Open Data
5. Cases not variables

2. Epistemologically, big data cannot capture the range of causal mechanisms for evidence based policy planning and practice. (e.g. UNDP)

3. Ontologically, big data are part of the social systems they seek to model. So, the notion that they can be used to know the world objectively is defunct. (feedback)

4. Temporally, there is a discrepancy between the temporality of policy and that of big data.

5. Theories of change intrinsic to social policy do not always fit those of big data.

Conclusions?

Big data for policy needs...

Interdisciplinary methods that
acknowledge complexity and
support equifinality.

Big data for policy needs...

Methodologies that acknowledge
the recursivity of big data to re-
model the social.

Big data for policy needs...

Methods that capture different
temporalities.

Big data for policy needs...

Approaches that facilitate
actors' agency to intervene.

Big data for policy needs...

Findings that are accessible to
big groups of diverse experts.