

Critical Data Storytelling for Libraries: Crafting Ethical Narratives for Advocacy and Impact, Kate McDowell, ALA Neal-Schuman, 2025. 192pp. Softcover, \$54.99. 9798892552806.

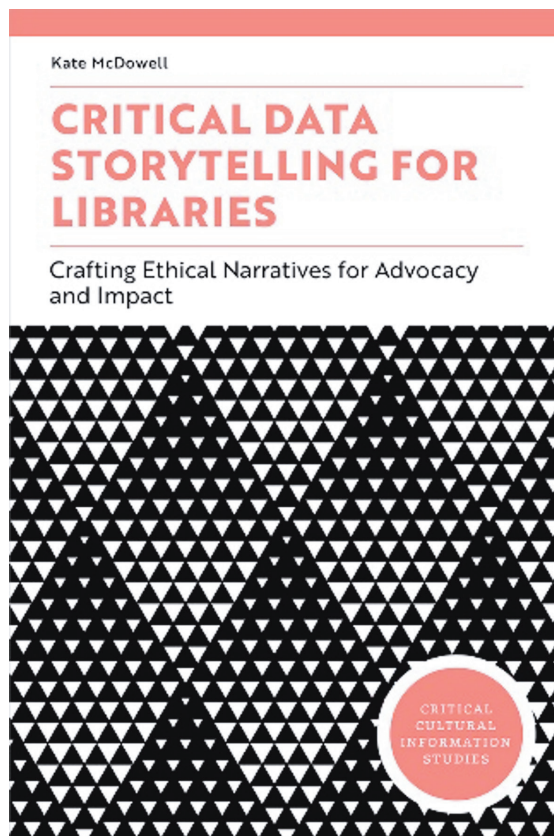


In *Critical Data Storytelling for Libraries: Crafting Ethical Narratives for Advocacy and Impact*, Kate McDowell offers a timely and necessary examination of how library workers conceptualize, interpret, and communicate data. Framed explicitly for practitioners, McDowell writes, “In this book, I adapt my data storytelling instruction for the audience of information professionals” (p. xvi), later expanding that audience to include, “library data analysts, librarians, advocates for libraries, or anyone tasked with gathering, making sense of, and making arguments about what to do based on data” (p. xxiv). This clarity of the audience grounds the text firmly in professional practice, positioning it as both a theoretical and practical guide.

McDowell identifies a critical gap in the existing literature where storytelling has been acknowledged in data practices but not sufficiently examined through an analytical lens. As the author notes, “prior research, however, lacks a critical approach; it does not engage story in depth, and it ignores the history, use, and power of storytelling to represent (or misrepresent) communities” (p. xvi). This is the key and is central to the book’s primary thesis. Drawing in Kimberlé Crenshaw’s framework of intersectionality, the work of Michel Foucault, and traditions in critical race theory and feminist theory, McDowell situates data within systems of power, knowledge production, and representation. In doing so, she challenges the assumption that data is neutral.

Chapter 1 establishes the conceptual foundation of critical data storytelling, emphasizing that, “Most of all, it is a story about digging deeper” (p. 1). This framing underscores the book’s central premise: that data, in isolation, is insufficient for understanding complex social realities. McDowell makes this explicit in her assertion that “Data—numbers, statistics, charts, graphs, visuals, interactive dashboards—alone can’t tell the story” (p. 1). This critique resonates strongly within library contexts, where quantitative metrics have long been privileged as indicators of value and impact. By contrast, McDowell advocates for a “both/and” approach that integrates quantitative and qualitative forms of knowledge, encouraging practitioners to tend to the narratives, contexts, and lived experiences that underlie numerical data.

Equally important is McDowell’s emphasis on ethics and relationality in data practices. She argues that “Respect is a precursor to the trust necessary for listening” (p. 3), foregrounding the importance of care and accountability in how



stories—and by extension, data—are gathered, interpreted, and presented. This perspective challenges extractive models of research that have historically marginalized or misrepresented communities. Instead, McDowell calls for approaches that are attentive to power dynamics and grounded in mutual respect. This is further reinforced in her assertion that “the teller must understand the relationship to the story” (p. 4), a statement that underlines the importance of positionality and reflexivity in data work. For library practitioners, this has direct implications for how data is collected, analyzed, and presented.

The structure of the book supports its dual emphasis on theory and practice. Chapter 3 outlines elements of storytelling, offering practical guidance on crafting narratives that are both engaging and logically sound. Chapter 4 extends this discussion by emphasizing audience awareness, encouraging readers to adapt their storytelling strategies to different contexts and stakeholders. These chapters are particularly useful for practitioners seeking to translate critical theory into actionable approaches within their institutions.

Chapter 5 brings the book together by situating critical data storytelling within broader sociopolitical contexts. McDowell addresses the role of libraries in confronting misinformation and advocating for both institutional and democratic values. In doing so, the author expands the scope of data storytelling beyond internal assessment, positioning it as a tool for public engagement and advocacy. This is especially relevant in a contemporary landscape where libraries are increasingly called upon to justify their existence and defend their role in supporting informed, equitable communities.

One of the book’s notable strengths is its accessibility. Despite being grounded in complex theoretical traditions, McDowell’s writing is clear, well-organized, and supported by effective visual aids, including tables and charts that enhance reader comprehension. These elements make the text approachable for a wide range of library employees, including those who may not have formal training in critical theory or data analysis.

At the same time, the book’s emphasis on flexibility and reflection may leave some readers seeking more prescriptive guidance. McDowell resists offering a rigid methodological framework, instead presenting critical data storytelling as an evolving, context-dependent practice. This openness allows for adaptation across diverse settings and may require readers to engage more deeply in the work of translation and application.

Ultimately, *Critical Data Storytelling for Libraries: Crafting Ethical Narratives for Advocacy and Impact*, makes a significant contribution to library and information science by reframing data as inherently narrative, relational, and political. For practitioners engaged in outreach, community-based work, or equity-focused initiatives, the book offers both validation and direction. It affirms that data can emerge from a range of practices, including those that are experimental or non-traditional. Research and assessment do not require formalized, extractive research designs.

By centering storytelling as a critical method, McDowell challenges library workers to move beyond surface-level interpretations of data and to engage more deeply with the human experiences those statistics represent. In doing so, she provides a framework that is not only analytically rigorous, but also aligned with values of social justice, care, and accountability. For a profession navigating increasing demands for assessment and advocacy, this shift is timely and necessary. — Jessica T. Zubia, *Outreach and Ethnic Studies Librarian, New Mexico State University*