

DEG Dialogues Theme 2022: AI, Power, and the Public Interest: Who's in control?

Despite the current swell of appeals to data science and “AI for the social good” in the academic literature,¹ the sociotechnical reality of contemporary data scientific practice seems to be telling a very different story.² Present-day AI research and development ecosystems are contested fields composed of complex and contending interests, asymmetrical power relations, and prohibitive entry costs. Notwithstanding their projections of charitable rhetoric, large tech companies are increasingly engaged in a “commercially-driven production of the social good”³ that, many have argued, produce outcomes which run counter to the public interest. The corresponding rise of phenomena like “data colonialism”⁴ and “philanthro-capitalism”⁵ are complicating “AI for the social good” narratives. They are heralding the coalescence of high-entry-cost digital innovation ecosystems, multinational corporate business models, and marketing strategies with humanitarian data work, digital development schemes, and market forces. The result is the proliferation of privately controlled forms of extractionist data work, that are, in fact, often at cross-purposes with inclusive, equitable, and societally beneficial innovation.

Trends such as these appear to be signalling “a profound rebalancing of power and governance in the domain of social life, privileging corporations with large-scale data power and making states (and other commercial and civil society actors) dependent on those corporations.”⁶ Similarly, incipient forms of data governmentality and commodification ever more infiltrate academic venues and research environments. In these, large tech companies’ proprietary data sets, seemingly unlimited financial resources, and massive computing power are, in effect, ‘de-democratizing’ AI and data science.⁷ Several processes and dynamics hasten this. They include the control that corporations possess over access to data and compute resources, their command over labour power through the university-corporate hybridization of ‘dual-affiliation’ career trajectories,⁸ and their manipulation of the terms of open research to protect their own rentiership claims to monopolistic control over intellectual property and infrastructural assets.⁹

The constellations of asymmetrical power relations, private corporate interests, and high entry costs for data innovation seem to establish the terms of engagement for accessing critical digital infrastructure that should otherwise be tightly bound up with the pursuit of the public good.

The theme for our DEG dialogues this year, “AI, Power, and the Public Interest: Who's in control?,” is framed around the difficult questions raised by these trends. Questions of concern include: Is the current

¹ Berendt, 2019; Floridi et al., 2020; Hager et al., 2019; Shi et al., 2020; Taddeo & Floridi, 2018.

² Much of the content of these paragraphs have been drawn from Leslie, 2021.

³ Magalhães & Couldry, 2020.

⁴ Magalhães & Couldry, 2020.

⁵ Burns, 2019.

⁶ Magalhães & Couldry, 2020.

⁷ Ahmed & Wahed, 2020; Van Dijck, 2018.

⁸ Roberge et al., 2019.

⁹ Abdalla & Abdalla, 2020; Amodei & Hernandez, 2018; Birch, 2020; Birch et al, 2020; Frank et al., 2019; Gupta et al., 2015; Lohr, 2019; Riedl, 2020; Roberge et al., 2019.

universe of data scientific innovation—that is, the global assemblage of data infrastructures, compute infrastructures, algorithmic infrastructures, funding schemes, and research and delivery capabilities and resources—equipped to actualize responsible and sustainable data work that serves the public good? Or do these infrastructural, resourcing, and human factors operate, in fact, to curtail and elide possibilities for that actualization? Is the human and biospheric interest in the realization of the global public good being fostered by the current national and global configuration of power relations, sociotechnical affordances, platform ecosystems, and infrastructural networks that characterize contemporary data scientific research and innovation environments? How should terms such as “public good,” “social good”, and “public interest” be construed and (re-)interpreted in the light of the factors that purport to promote their realization, or are seen as inhibiting them? What role should states and governments play in the provision of, and the regulation and governance of, critical digital infrastructure? How can, and should, effective technology governance (including laws, regulatory regimes, and other policy instruments) work in the complicated, multivalent, and transnational innovation ecosystems and platform political economy that is dominated by Big Tech?

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