

3.1 Data About Me



Rising concerns about personal data collection and use cover many issues. Pressure for solutions that inform and ‘empower’ individuals is growing.

In our workshops, much of the debate about data focused on personal data. This is not surprising. By definition, personal data relates most closely and directly to individuals’ lives in many ways. Data about an individual may reveal intimate details about their lives. It could be - and is - used to bring them many benefits in terms of innovative, personalised services. But it could also render them vulnerable, especially if it gets into the wrong hands (for example via identity theft), or used ‘against’ rather than ‘for’ them (discriminating against individuals or groups of people based on what data reveals about them).

Personal data is also where debates about power and fairness is most acute. Huge amounts of money are being made by some profit-seeking companies via their collection and monetisation of the data of billions of individuals. Many individuals feel powerless in the face of these corporations and their intense concentrations of data power.

Such issues exercised the minds of many workshop participants, who wanted to analyse exactly what is going on in relation to the collection and use of personal data - and to find positive ways forward. It wasn’t easy - partly because issues relating to personal data can be far more complex than they appear at first sight - starting with definitions.

Many people, when they talk about personal data, refer to very obvious bits of data such as name, address, contact details, payment card details, medical data, or personal purchase history. But the European General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) go much further, defining personal data as: “any information relating to an identified or identifiable natural person (‘data subject’); an identifiable natural person is one who can be identified, directly or indirectly, in particular by reference to an identifier such as a name, an identification number, location data, an online identifier, or to one or more factors specific to the physical, physiological, genetic, mental, economic, cultural, or social identity of that natural person.”

By potentially including data points such as cookies (‘online identifiers’) and location data, this European definition of personal data casts the net much wider than many anticipate. As we will see in our discussion of the ‘Internet of Things’ and ‘machine to machine’ data, if it generates data that relates to an identifiable individual (for example, their usage of a device) in some jurisdictions, it will be seen as personal data. The border lines between ‘personal’ and ‘non-personal’ data are therefore not as clear as they may seem, especially when issues such as anonymisation and pseudonymisation are added to the mix.

This is important when we come to discuss the potential value of personal data. While much data ‘about me’ may include data that could be personally identifiable, there is also much data about people and their behaviours which is statistical in nature (i.e. not identifiable), but which is the source of important insights and of great potential in helping improve peoples’ lives.

Many complex issues are therefore raised by how personal data is currently being collected and used. These include whether individuals know about or understand what data is being collected and what it is being used for, whether they would be comfortable about this collection and use if they did know, whether such collection and use of data infringes individuals rights to ‘privacy’, and whether they are receiving a fair share of the financial and other benefits that their data helps generate.

Multiple solutions are being proposed. These include:

- Ensuring greater transparency
- Questions about ‘who we trust’
- User education
- Calls for regulation to empower individuals in their dealings with organisations
- Calls for regulation to restrict organisations’ ability to collect or use data or exercise ‘data power’
- Proposals to redistribute power and control by, for example, providing individuals with personal data stores which enable them to collect and control their own data independently of the organisations they deal with

“There is a need to find a balance between protection of personally sensitive data, and the value of sharing.”

Bangalore workshop

It's not surprising, then, that many workshops focused their attention on issues relating to personal data. We will return to them in detail in specific chapters, but these quotes provide a flavour.

What We Heard

There was broad agreement that issues around the control of personal data are increasingly part of the public debate. In Dakar, it was observed, *"whatever happens, people still need to be at the centre of the system, not the machines. This will be difficult, because artificial intelligence is becoming more and more dominant."*

As understanding grows, many in our workshops felt that we are witnessing a swing away from corporate power, back to the individual. In Singapore, there was recognition that there is a conflict between what consumers understand to be ownership, and what companies understand to be access, but that *"people are taking data back – there may be a shift in power to control by the individual."* This sentiment was supported in Johannesburg, but with the proviso *"... it will depend on where ownership comes to rest."* In Tokyo, the view was that *"data will increasingly be owned by individuals and not by the government or corporates."* On the other hand, some felt that the whole issue is a bit of a red herring. In a student workshop in Pretoria, they proposed that *"no one should own data."*

Discussions around personal data highlighted a number of cultural differences. For example, in Europe, where privacy is held in high esteem, the view from London was that *"privacy is real – individually and nationally. We need a lack of compromise on this."* However, in Tokyo, the view was that *"most people don't really care about privacy – despite what the experts think."*

When it comes to the consideration of the value of data, the view in Bangalore was that *"there will be growing awareness of the value of personal data, and this will empower individuals.... But the appetite for monetisation will lead to more collaboration. There is a need to find a balance between protection of personally sensitive data, and the value of sharing."* In Copenhagen, they felt *"we have a willingness to sell data too cheap – it is a trade-off."*

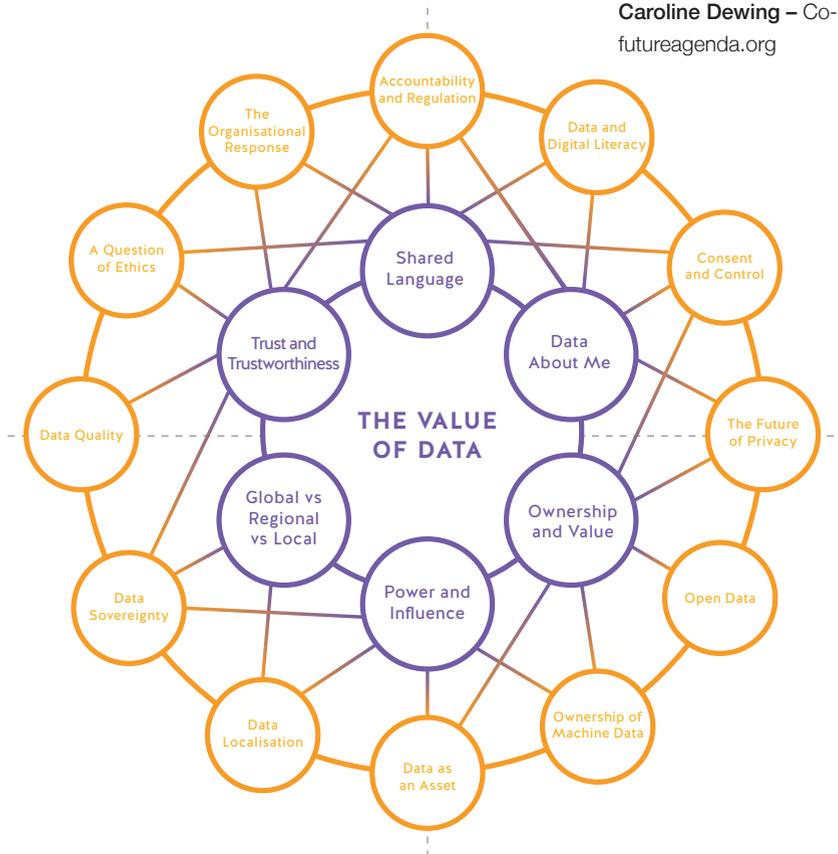
Context

This is one of 18 key insights to emerge from a major global open foresight project exploring the future value of data.

Throughout 2018, Future Agenda canvassed the views of a wide range of 900 experts with different backgrounds and perspectives from around the world, to provide their insights on the future value of data. Supported by Facebook and many other organisations, we held 30 workshops across 24 countries in Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Europe. In them, we reviewed the data landscape across the globe, as it is now, and how experts think it will evolve over the next five to ten years.

The aim of the project was to gain a better understanding of how perspectives and priorities differ across the world, and to use the diverse voices and viewpoints to help governments, organisations, and individuals to better understand what they need to do to realise data's full potential.

From the multiple discussions 6 over-arching themes were identified alongside 12 additional, related future shifts as summarised in the diagram below.



Details of each of these, a full report and additional supporting information can all be found on the dedicated mini-site: www.deliveringvaluethroughdata.org

About Future Agenda

Future Agenda is an open source think tank and advisory firm. It runs a global open foresight programme, helping organisations to identify emerging opportunities, and make more informed decisions. Future Agenda also supports leading organisations, large and small, on strategy, growth and innovation.

Founded in 2010, Future Agenda has pioneered an open foresight approach bringing together senior leaders across business, academia, NFP and government to challenge assumptions about the next ten years, build an informed view and establish robust growth strategies focused on major emerging opportunities. We connect the informed and influential to help drive lasting impact.

For more information please see: www.futureagenda.org

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