

3.3 Power and Influence



Data is a means of exercising power, as well as a focus for multiple struggles for power. Regulation focuses on rebalancing influence between companies, government, and society.

Workshop participants around the world were acutely aware that with data comes power; that the more data an organisation can collect, use, or control, the more power it has at its disposal. This power can come in many forms. It could be the power to make decisions that affect peoples' lives by, for example, giving or withholding their access to services. Some organisations' use of data gives them the power to act as 'choice architects', deciding what information is to be presented to people and how. Concentrations of data can create concentrations of economic power, which in turn could affect the distribution of available benefits.

Given the many and varied ways in which data is collected and used by all the different parties, we found scope for multiple different power relationships, for example, between:

- Policy makers/regulators and large data-driven companies;
- Governments and their citizens;
- Companies and their customers;
- Different/overlapping political jurisdiction

“When companies mess with complexity too great to monitor or understand, disclosure becomes an empty gesture.”

London workshop

There were also many different suggested ways of addressing unhealthy imbalances of power. The following generated particular interest:

Transparency: Many workshop participants were particularly concerned by what they saw as the unaccountable power of proprietary algorithms that are effectively immune from scrutiny, and give the organisations which develop them huge influence. The lack of transparency makes it almost impossible for anyone else to understand the economic, political, and cultural agendas behind their creation.

Accountability: There was also much concern about the ability of search engines and social networks to influence the information individuals are presented with. The power to include, exclude, and order the presentation of information, allows these companies to ensure that certain public impressions become permanent, while others disappear. Without knowing what a search engine actually does when it ranks sites, we cannot assess when it is acting in good faith to help users, and when it is biasing results to favour its own commercial, cultural, or political interests.

Ways of rebalancing power: Debate focused particularly on whether global technology companies have accrued too much power. Questions were asked as to whether they exercise this power responsibly, and what (if any) safeguards, regulations, and reforms are needed to create a healthier, fairer, safer, more innovative or resilient data ecosystem. Some workshop participants felt that the activities of those wielding disproportionate data power should be restricted by increased regulation. Others sought more radical responses by dispersing power more equally (via competition rules and anti-trust legislation, for example).

Problems and Dilemmas:

- Organisations collecting and using large quantities of data can generate significant value for individuals, society, the economy, and for themselves. At the same time, however, they may create excessive concentrations of power, and/or use the power they do have unfairly or inappropriately. How should these dangers best be addressed? By who?
- Moreover, by what criteria should we judge whether an organisation has accrued too much power, or is using this power unfairly or inappropriately? Who should be responsible for making such judgements?
- if a corporate entity is deemed to have too much power or to be exercising its power irresponsibly, what are the appropriate mechanisms for effective action?
- How should these decisions be implemented and enforced?
- How can/should disputes between different entities and jurisdictions (local, regional, global) relating to the collection and use of data be handled?

“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.”

Dakar workshop.”

What We Heard

Questions relating to the exercise of power cropped up in most of our discussions. To provide a flavour of the discussions, we provide some examples here.

There is a growing sense that some companies are benefitting disproportionately from the collection, use, and frequently the sale of personal information. The Bangalore workshop pointed this out by saying, *“the consumers’ rights are always fringe; they don’t have the power of the likes of Google or Facebook.”* This is driving a public desire to give individuals greater control over their data. It was recognised, however, that doing this could create a new dilemma; how to maintain control of our data without losing the benefits and conveniences that exchanging personal information for digital services undoubtedly provides.

Transparency: We heard many calls for more effective legislative frameworks to help shape the emerging data economy in a more equitable way, to increase transparency, and make technology companies more accountable. Many in Africa and Asia, inspired by the EU’s stance on GDPR, were keen to take up the challenge. In Mexico City, the view was that *“the biggest change will be in the way governments control data.”*

“No one has yet worked out the extent to which patient data can compromise government security.”

Singapore workshop

In Dakar, it was observed, *“as the power of data increases, it can be used to warp our sense of reality. Fake news is only an early sign of things to come...”* Across our workshops there were multiple calls for the need for greater digital literacy, so that individuals can choose what products and services they use, and have better control over their own personal data. Many argued for greater transparency and intelligibility around the use of data. They pointed out that if it is too difficult to understand what is being done with our data, it is impossible for individuals (or organisations) to have an equal relationship with the companies that exploit it. Some suggested that increased transparency would go a long way to addressing this, but it is not a solution on its own. One comment made in London was that *“when companies mess with complexity too great to monitor or understand, disclosure becomes an empty gesture.”* For the power of data to be more equally spread, there needs to be greater public understanding about how data is being used. Some in London even suggested that transactions that *“are too complex to explain to outsiders, may well be too complex to be allowed to exist.”*

Accountability: Across Africa and India, there was a strong sense of frustration about the dominance of primarily Silicon Valley American companies. Many saw this as a new form of colonialism, with personal data becoming the latest raw material exploited by the west. Participants in Singapore and Australia felt that managing the flow of national data was an issue of national security. In a workshop in Singapore, specifically focussed on patient data, we were told that the law restricts the sharing of health data beyond national boundaries because *“no one has yet worked out the extent to which patient data can compromise government security”*

In Bangalore, participants felt that the lack of transparency about how data is used and manipulated has led to a growing *“digital gap, both at country level and also for individuals.”* This was also echoed in Madrid, where it was felt that this data divide will continue to grow, and will *“continue to be dominated by issues around transparency, ubiquity, and control.”* Others reiterated the need for greater transparency about how data is managed and shared, in order to allow individuals to have greater control of their data.

Regulation: A number of mechanisms to ensure a more even distribution of power were discussed. This included greater interoperability and portability (spreading access), and the possibility of breaking up those organisations which have themselves become monopolies. In Bogota, it was suggested that public private partnerships could be the best way to create and implement better governance. Many advocated the establishment of a “Global Data Vision”⁶, and a global body to develop and oversee the implementation of regulation. Sounds great - but when pressed, no one was really able to suggest how this should operate in practice, and where the ultimate responsibility should lie.

Finally, in Asia and the US in particular, we had conversations around geopolitics and how different ideologies might influence the use of data. In Hong Kong, the question was asked, *“what would be the implication of China winning the debate around data, and what would happen if it exports its values around the world?”* In Washington DC, the comment was, *“if you see this as competing modes, then it matters, because as China grows, more people/nations will try to emulate it.”* Prosaically in Dakar, the view was, *“we don’t mind if it’s noodles in the morning or burgers in the afternoon; we need to create our own solutions.”*

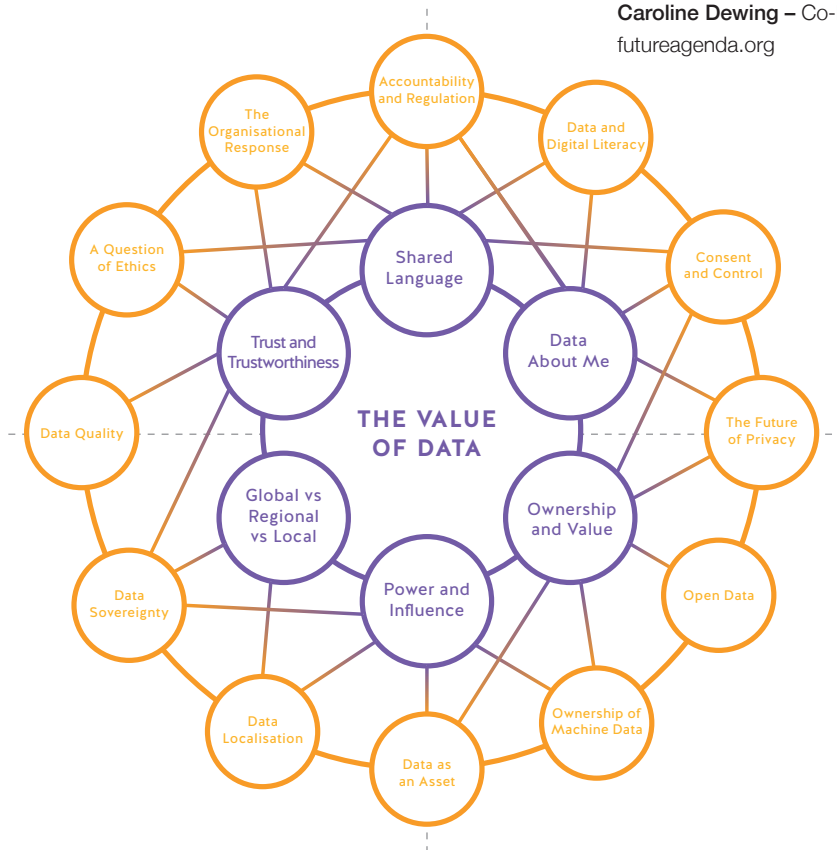
Context

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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