

3.6 Shared Language



People are unclear on where the value in data comes from or what form it takes. A key step is a common language about data that provides clarity of terms

Mounting discussion in the media and politics about data, its ownership, use, and its value, highlights a lack of consensus around how to describe fundamental concepts. In government, business, and civil society, this undermines the ability to build alignment and develop robust ways forward. A simple, shared, accessible terminology is increasingly being called for, in order to establish a common understanding of what the key issues are, and what options are available to address them. This lack of a common language and understanding is a major impediment to attempts to build cooperative or regulatory endeavours. Without it, the possibility of reaching an agreement or deciding on an appropriate course of action is limited, if not impossible. Given this, there was widespread consensus in our workshops that time and energy must be spent to define and agree terms around the use and value of data.

Problems and Dilemmas:

- Is it possible to create a ‘common language’ where, across the world, key stakeholders all use the same terms and definitions to describe what is happening with data?
- Is it possible to create a shared understanding of what the issues and options are, even if there are disagreements as to how important these issues are, or what the most desirable courses of action are?
- If it is not possible to create such a common language and shared understanding, how to advance debate and understanding of the multiple issues being raised by the emergence of a data-driven economy?
- If it is possible to create this common language and shared understanding, what is the best means of doing so, and who should lead/take responsibility for this quest?

What We Heard

Beyond the varied metaphors for data (sunshine in Tokyo, the periodic table in Singapore, religion in Madrid), myriad views on the definition of key issues, such as informed consent or digital literacy, were expressed everywhere. In the vast majority of workshops, the lack of agreement around precise, common terms for the key elements of the digital world was highlighted as a major concern. These were not just at a holistic cross-society and cross-industry level, but also within individual sectors. For example, our preceding 12 discussions on the future of patient data in 2017/18 highlighted how little is understood by professionals within healthcare on the differences between aggregated and anonymised data, ownership and control; machine learning and artificial intelligence (AI), and artificial general intelligence (AGI); as well as between data bias and data quality. Other sector-based discussions on automotive data in the UK, US, and Germany showed similar different interpretations.

In our workshops, examples such as these were all repeated in varied locations. Different definitions were used for data sovereignty and data localisation, between a data tax and digital taxation, and between data literacy and digital literacy – even by regulators. There was widespread acknowledgement of this and resounding support for the need to develop a global, cross-sector agreement for the terminology of data in multiple locations around, including Jakarta, Bangkok, Dakar, Mexico City, Toronto, and even Washington DC. Those in Singapore voiced the view of many, when they suggested that the rationale for this is to deliver *“a more clearly articulated government data strategy to enable community-driven initiatives which have wide public benefit.”*

Language is not only about policy, however. It is about understanding. Without an agreed language around data use, it is difficult to see how populations can become digitally literate. Concerns about this sparked a total of nineteen separate discussions on Digital Literacy during the programme. Irrespective of geography, age, employment, or method, the message is clear; *“the divide between the technology literate and the technology illiterate will be a huge challenge, and will have grave consequences if not addressed.”*²⁶ The reasons for this are not hard to uncover. As access to connectivity increases apace, and governments increasingly rely on data to connect with their citizens, managing cyber risks, ensuring individuals have the skills necessary to engage with the state, and building a workforce fit for a digital economy, are all priority areas. Failure to address digital literacy will have consequences, not least widening the digital divide, creating skills shortages, and extracting value from data. But, how will governments be able to extend a digital literacy programme if the lack of clarity around the language of data remains unresolved?

“The divide between the technology literate and the technology illiterate will be a huge challenge, and will have grave consequences if not addressed.”

Tokyo workshop

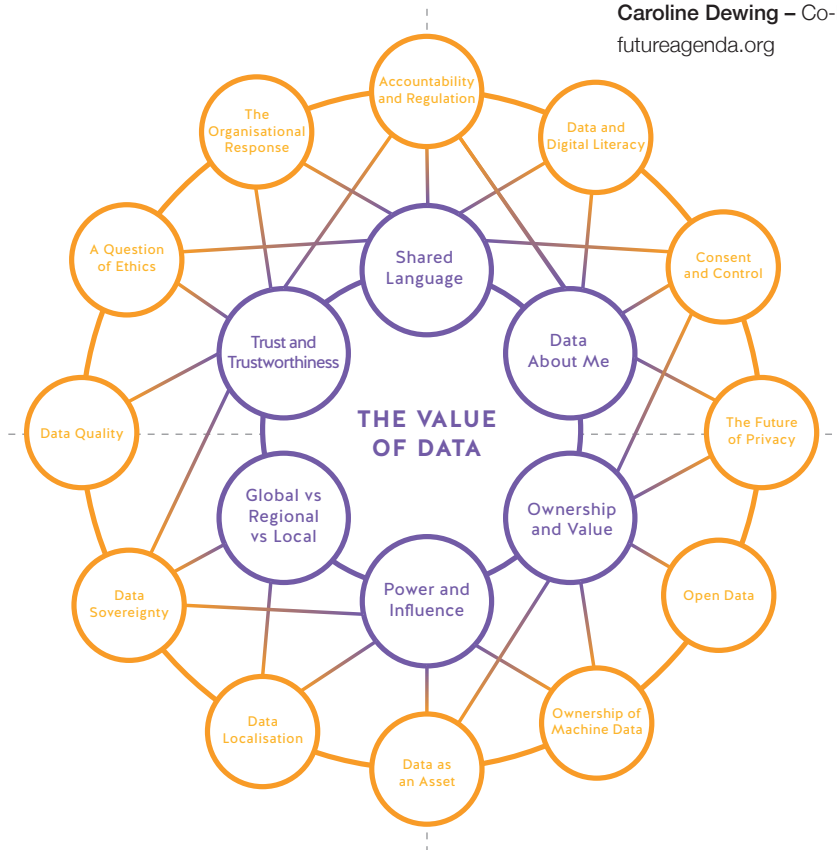
Context

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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