



The Masters Tools Will Never Dismantle the Masters House: New approaches to ethical issues in data

BY DOUG SPECHT

As we try to grapple with ever more data, control has been handed to an ever growing number of poorly regulated tech companies who fail to store, collect, or use this data appropriately. The classical computational answers are no longer viable, instead we need more social sciences, and a lot more ethics.

We have a problem. It's one that has been building for some time, one that we have seen coming, but one that has

grown beyond control or measure. We are entering the age of Peak Data. More data is being generated by more technologies than ever before. And more data is being used to drive the social conditions of our lives, in turn creating more data through feedback loops. The films we watch and the music we listen to is now decided by digital algorithms that throw up suggestions and recommendations. Our friendship networks are facilitated through digital platforms which shoe-horn us into categories and groups.

Decisions about where infrastructure should be build, or bus routes placed, are based upon millions of data points collected as people travel around cities. Almost every part of our day interacts with digital tools, through the data we provide, and through the decisions made by tech companies and data driven projects that pertain to make our lives better.

But, we know that as more and more start-ups, as well as the big players such as Google, try and make the world a 'better place' they are encountering problems. News outlets relish in stories of racist chat bots such as Microsoft's Tay. We are rightly up in arms about stories of "Racist soap dispensers" that don't work for people of colour emerge, or over incidents such as when 'Flickr's autotag system mislabelled concentration camps as "jungle gyms"'. The answer to these issues is often presented as a need to collect more data, but this is an over-simplification and even a dangerous path to travel.

The collecting more data narrative is presented over a back drop of stories about data leaks, data sales, theft and data misuse. As we learn more about the way in which data is used (and

abused) by governments and those with political interests, we build a growing sense that, on some level, digital technologies are eroding democracy, and rather than empowering us to provide information about how we wish to be governed, are instead used through a slight of hand to empower elites. UK think tank NESTA has noted that ‘as the dark side of the internet is becoming increasingly clear, public demand for more accountable, democratic, more human alternatives are growing’. Inside tech companies too, concern is growing; the recent People, Power, Technology report by DotEveryone found that 28% of UK tech workers had seen decisions being made about the tech they worked on that they believed had negative consequences for society.

Despite this, the solutions to the dark side of digital technologies are built on the same frameworks that got us into this trouble to begin with, and are born from the very mantra that got us here to begin with; ‘move fast, break things’. The masters tools, though, Audre Lorde reminds us, will never dismantle the masters house, which means we need a radically different approach from the traditional computational solutions of increasing data security; collecting more data; and digital literacy.

Data security

Let’s deal with this one quickly. There is no possible way to secure data. Anyone who tells you they can is either lying or ignorant, or maybe both. Even the biggest companies and governments with all their technology and limitless money can’t stop data breaches, and even if they could, a change in government policy, or the physical taking of data as experienced by Sybille Geissler in Austria early this year, means no data is ever secure. There are many arguments as to whether privacy is already dead, and while we do still enjoy moments of true privacy, it would be safe to assume that any data that is already out there could well be sold to the highest bidder, or stolen.

Collect more data

‘If we have more data, we can build better models, and be more inclusive’. ‘The issue arose because there are not enough people of colour in silicon valley’; ‘not enough women in STEM’; ‘our test group or pilot study was not diverse enough’, ‘our datasets were incomplete’. We hear this time and again. It may be true. But each time the solution is the same; collect more data. Make the datasets more full. We wouldn’t have racist soap dispensers or recruitment bots that exclude women, if only we had more data about more sectors of society. Aside from the data protection issue outlined above, there is a bigger problem here.

These are not data issues. The data merely serves to highlight deeply embedded social bases. These are social, not computational, problems. Attempting to solve them through more data and better algorithms is a solution tempting because of its simplicity. It is both easy and pleasant to think that such things could be solved by collecting more data, that the world ills and inequalities would be addressed and solved.

Of course it is not so simple, but it isn’t that we would be unable to ever collect enough data that is the problem (although that is in itself a problem). The more concerning issue is that the act of collecting more data doesn’t make people better represented, instead it serves to increase how much they are being surveilled. Collecting data is an act of watching people, and cataloguing data becomes an act of cataloguing people. When this is being carried out by poorly regulated tech companies, we run even greater risks of subjugating people who are often already vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Tech companies become instruments of classification of the Other to fulfil the needs of their database. Cherry picking who to surveill more in order to complete their datasets. This can lead to more harm than good, creating divisions, unmovable labels, biases and stigma. There has already been some backlash against the UN’s use of biometrics to register migrants,



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and further questions over the datafication of the Other need to be urgently asked.

Collect, or give, less data

Here too a deep contradiction plays out. It would seem on the face of it a simple solution as a user to just spend less time engaging with digital technologies that collect our data. Indeed, there are many apps that will help you do this, turning off features of your smartphone or computer for set time periods. Yet in an age of peak data, the very notion of going ‘off-grid’ is more revealing about you than being online. Tech companies are awash with so much data they know everything about you already. Adding more data becomes unhelpful as they are no longer able to see patterns. The data becomes a kind of overflowing pile of digital garbage. Instead companies are already starting to collect less, and encouraging us to be more careful in how we use devices. This though is a self-preservation mechanism on the part of the companies, not a altruistic endeavour. Using your technology less allows data to be more specific and also allows companies to see what really matters to you. This then can be used to further categorise and pigeon hole individuals for the purpose of targeted adverts or other ‘personalised’ content.

Education

Given the issues above, we might call for more digital literacy, more coding camps for kids. While there are some merits to helping people better understand the data that drives the technology that now rules their lives, it too approaches the

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problem from the wrong direction. As noted by Siva Vaidhyanathan, this education often does little more than place the burden of making sense of manipulative systems squarely on the user. They must protect themselves, even when such protection is impossible. And of course access to such education is not universal, and is often out of reach from just those communities that are most negatively affected by social bias and computational efforts to address them.

Ways forwards?

The tech industry, the media, and our governments have become obsessed with building and protecting ever bigger datasets in order to iron out social bias. But we can never protect the data, and computers can never solve social biases. These tasks distract us, make us feel we are progressing, and doing good in the world. And as Bernard Stiegler noted, only serve to dramatically increase the distance between technological systems and social organisations.

Instead we need to slow down, stop innovating. We must stop fiddling with data. We must ask whether we should build any of these platforms or technologies at all. Should we collect any of this data? We need to move away from ‘move fast, break things’ and slow towards something more akin to medical ethics; ‘do no harm’. We must examine social biases, not from the perspective of the technology itself, but from the perspective of society. We must look away from tech companies and start-ups with their computational solutions, and towards sociology, ethics, and philosophy, in order to understand and address complex social issues. **ESR**



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