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The Global Data Justice Project

Places and populations that were previously digitally invisible are now part of a ‘data revolution’ that is being hailed as a transformative tool for human and economic development. Yet this unprecedented expansion of the power to digitally monitor, sort, and intervene is not well connected to the idea of social justice, nor is there a clear concept of how broader access to the benefits of data technologies can be achieved without amplifying misrepresentation, discrimination, and power asymmetries.

We therefore need a new framework for data justice integrating privacy, non-discrimination, and non-use of data technologies into the same framework as positive freedoms such as representation and access to data. The Global Data Justice project researches the lived experience of data technologies in high- and low-income countries worldwide, seeking to understand people’s basic needs with regard to these technologies. We seek the perspectives of civil society organisations, technology companies, and policymakers and in doing so focus on the diverse debates and processes occurring around data governance in different regions, to draw out overarching principles and needs that can push data governance in the direction of social justice.

In doing so, we relate our findings to current governance and rights frameworks in order to understand whether they match with people’s subjective needs, and build our findings into a conceptual framework. We begin from a conceptualisation of data justice along three dimensions of freedom: (in) visibility, autonomy with regard to technology, and combating data-driven discrimination. This entails that people should be visible in ways that benefit them, but also have privacy when visibility is counter to their interests. We should be free to use data technologies in ways that we choose, but should not be used by those technologies. Finally, we should have the ability to challenge discrimination, and should also be guarded from discrimination by those in charge of governing technology development and use.

In our presentation, we will delve into this conceptual framework for the project. We will share some insights from our 2020 book on [Data Justice and COVID-19](#), as well as some insights from an ongoing project on [sphere transgressions](#).

We will also reflect on some of the following questions which have animated the project:

- How should data technologies be governed on the global level?
- What kind of debate can we have across borders and cultures about datafication, and what kind of debate do we need?
- How do we balance data markets, apps, and technology firms that are global with regulatory and governance systems that are local?

Most recently, the Global Data Project has been considering the potential role of peremptory norms, which are a principle of international law, for data governance: 'bright lines' that prohibit certain behaviour, no matter the circumstances. There are relatively few of the norms, including genocide, torture, and apartheid. Norms are not principles but mechanisms for preserving the essential functioning of the international community. They come to exist through a process of international commitment both to their content, and to the shared responsibility for ensuring they are not transgressed. We will challenge workshop participants to think about what they either intuitively consider off-limits, or see as indispensable and, therefore, the duty of particular actors, in the digital sphere. If we can identify such things, what would then be possible starting points for establishing these positions as international norms? If so, what is the community that could agree and establish them, what sort of enforcement would be necessary, and what would be the first steps?

