

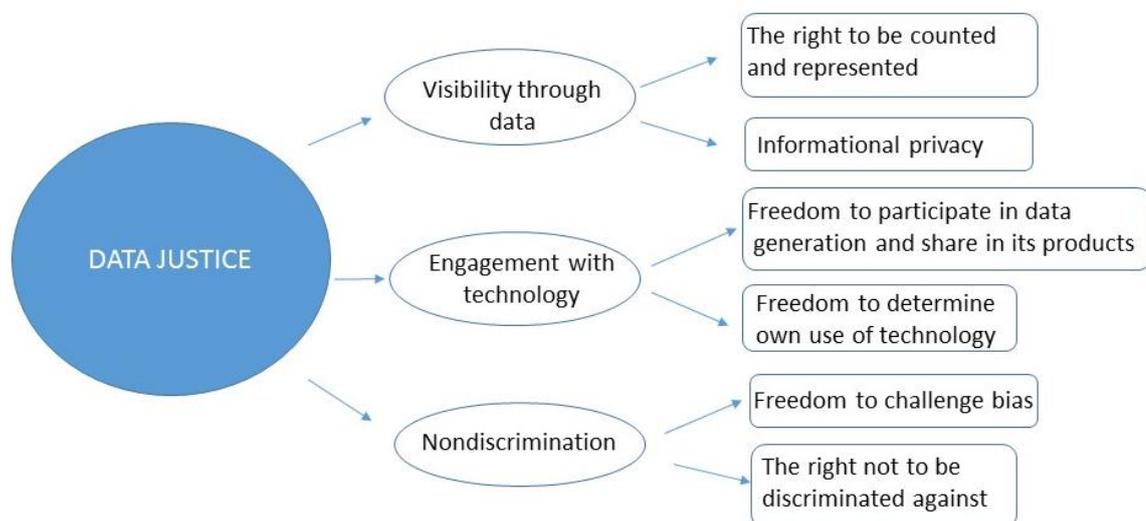
Project brief:

Global data justice in the era of big data: toward an inclusive framing of informational rights and freedoms (DATAJUSTICE)

Technology use is converging worldwide, creating data flows from places and populations that were previously digitally invisible. The resulting ‘data revolution’ is being hailed as a transformative tool for human and economic development. Yet the data revolution is primarily a technical one, and there is an assumption that the power data technologies offer to monitor and intervene will inevitably play out in favour of the poor and marginalised. This research proposes that conceptualising and refining the notion of *data justice* will help to both foster the positive potential of data technologies for human development and provide ways to decrease their negative impacts, by providing a framework to inform their design and governance worldwide.

With this project we aim to 1) provide a critical assessment of the case for, and the obstacles to, data justice as an overall framework for data technologies’ design and governance, and 2) present a conceptual framework for data justice, refining it through a series of discussions and debates. We also aim to combat the ethnocentricity of most analyses so far in this area, by conducting digital and ethnographic analysis in different regions worldwide.

Our research will be based on three pillars, drawn from existing work on informational justice (Floridi, 2013; Heeks & Renken, 2016; Hildebrandt, 2015; Johnson, 2014): **visibility, digital (dis)engagement, and countering data-driven discrimination:**



The research will draw on Sen and Nussbaum’s capabilities and freedoms-based approach, which proposes that the demands of justice go beyond ‘getting the institutions and rules right’ (Sen, 2009: 20), and suggests that instead we should examine how data technologies influence ‘the kind of lives that people can actually lead’ (2009:20).

Methods and timeline

The project will run from 2018-2023. We will start with conceptual work to build out our notion of the essential components of data justice and their interactions, using literature from

multiple disciplines and world regions. We will seek overarching principles that can bridge between different ideas of data justice emerging across regions and across academic disciplines (see particularly Dencik, Hintz, & Cable, 2016; Heeks & Renken, 2016). This stage will include digital mappings of the conversations taking place worldwide on issues of data and justice, which will be repeated throughout the project to orient our research and keep track of emerging and evolving discourses from the spheres of civil society, academia, policy, law and technology development.

In the following stage we will explore these discourses more deeply in three case-study contexts. These are chosen because each highlights particularly strong positions or debates regarding how data technologies should be developed and used, and because in each of them moral pressures threaten to diminish the value of a justice-based approach:

1) Economic development, where data justice is weighed against economic growth.

This case study will focus on Singapore, an engine of economic growth, but also one of the most surveilled urban environments on earth where the authorities argue that ubiquitous surveillance is necessary to protect a diverse society from political instability.

2) Security, where surveillance is justified on the basis of potential conflict.

This case study focuses on Kenya, which has led the world in developing mobile money and other human development projects using digital data, but where security threats, crime and violence, along with a growing data economy are reorienting datafication towards aims of control and surveillance.

3) Humanitarian emergencies, where urgent needs must be weighed against the long-term potential for data-related harm.

This case study looks at the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative's Signal Program on Human Security and Technology, which has since 2010 been conducting machine learning on satellite data to analyse the impacts of conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa. The project is providing leadership in conceptualising the problem of Demographically Identifiable Information and data-related harms on the group level.

The final stage of the project will involve discussions and debates in nine cities worldwide, with the aim of testing and gaining feedback on our findings. We will incorporate our case-study collaborators in these discussions, but will also use them to connect with civil society, tech developers and policymakers around the world, bringing them into the debate on what constitutes data justice and how we might want to operationalise the principles the project has established.

References

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