

RD

Celebrating the Responsible Data community



*8 years of leading the way from best
intentions to best practice*

Compiled by The Engine Room

Credits

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Looking back at 8 years of Responsible Data

Eight years ago, a small group of practitioners wanting to address the challenges and opportunities for responsibly using data for social change came together as a budding Responsible Data community. Today, we celebrate the hundreds of community members who contribute to this space with healthy debates and resource-sharing about strategy, compliance, innovation and emerging risks.

To celebrate this anniversary, we invited 12 experts and members of the community to write about how discussions about various Responsible Data-related topics have evolved over the past eight years. The broad range of topics explored in this collection reflect the variety of discussions that have taken place within the community, and span topics such as responsible data visualisation, responsibly conducting open source investigations and informed consent in data collection processes. Aside from looking back at how these topics have developed throughout the years, the authors also look ahead and share their thoughts about what they hope will come next. We hope that this collection of articles will excite you about the future of the Responsible Data community and we look forward to continuing the conversation with you!

Find more information about how to join the Responsible Data community here: <https://responsibledata.io>

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What Do Responsible Data and Acrobats Have in Common?

Author: [Amy O'Donnell](#) and [Melton Llenos](#)

At the Responsible Data Forum in 2014, a participant described an ‘acrobat’ data controller weighing up opportunities and risks before stepping out on the ‘tightrope’ of data collection. In our case, the data controller is an international non-governmental organisation (INGO) or local partner deciding whether to collect or process data in a humanitarian or social justice situation.

Responsible Data is a reference point for balancing decisions about the stories data can tell alongside the rights people hold within dynamics of power. [After surveying the scene and making a plan](#), a codified set of principles can help us get balance or decide whether or not to stop – if, for example, we’re unsure whether our acrobat can cross the tightrope safely, or indeed whether they are the best person for the job.

Values-based decisions

Since 2014, many organisations, including Oxfam, have codified their data-related commitments in Responsible Data policies, crucially linking approaches to safety, dignity and rights. In conjunction with laws, policies offer a framework.

As data collection activities can often involve subjectivity, judgement, and necessary decisions around proportionality, policies based on principles are important to set out the values that frame practical decisions, as well as to start conversations and stimulate thinking on the application and meaningful use of data.

In this respect, Responsible Data isn’t only about complying to a set of predefined rules; it’s about balancing the opportunities against the risks: only collecting what we need (data minimisation) or working with partners who may be better placed to collect the data that’s needed; being clear about the data we keep (and why) and the data we never collect; understanding who might be highlighted in the data we have, and who is missing from it.

While a new lens is needed to realise how inequalities show up differently in the use of data in the context of rapid technological advancements, Responsible Data can be an anchor through this change as we apply the same principles, no matter the new sparkly tools. This is ever more important, as the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in [a sharp increase in technology hype and concerns over privacy in applications like contract tracing systems.](#)

It's important to recognise that the time and resources needed to write up a policy, and the power to enforce it, are in themselves privilege. Organisations, government agencies and service providers develop and implement policies for people who may not be aware of their existence or know anything about them. Data protection frameworks, regulators and national discourse about the role of data as an expression of power reflect widespread concern and different approaches to solving the systemic problems at hand. We expect to increasingly have conversations through civic or public frameworks and expression – and see the Responsible Data movement take leadership from outside of Europe and North America. For example, Kenya [launched a data protection law in 2019 and appointed the first Data Protection Commissioner in 2020.](#)

Data and power – organisations and individuals

Data is inherently linked to power. Understanding who the acrobat is and what kind of power they hold in their role is crucial. Those who design participatory systems and methodologies can affect who shows up in data, whose voice is heard and, in turn, how decisions get made. Many INGOs are on a reflective journey to acknowledge the power we hold in partnerships and relationships, [as we rethink both our role in shifting power and how we can show up in a way aligned to equity, inclusiveness, anti-racism and accountability.](#)

In turn, we consider the power of individuals within organisations (or adjacent service providers) who end up on the front lines of implementation in their relationships within a community. Looking at the use of data itself with a power lens asks us to reflect on whether data subjects really know what their data is used for or what stories are told about them.

Most of us now agree that consent is very rarely 'informed' or freely given – especially in contexts where there is a significant power differential (such as humanitarian response). The reality always involves sharing some data with the understanding that being interviewed means you are more likely to be eligible for assistance. As a local partner, funding pressures require collecting and sharing more data to back up proposals or reporting.

Sharing is caring: policy to practice

For Responsible Data to be meaningful, we must move from wordsmithed policy documents to winning over the hearts and minds of those making decisions about data collection and use in the course of their work, as we realise that we all have a role to play. We need to emphasise work on culture, which frames a collective understanding of what ‘doing the right thing’ looks like in pragmatic, solutions-orientated ways. This goes hand-in-hand with building a broader culture of accountability that is not only open to feedback, but willing to change as a result.

The Responsible Data community has been a great example of active resource-sharing, and many of the resources shared have been practical, actionable and supportive of learning. The more such resources and tools that are available within our community – focused on values-driven action and on reducing the burden on implementers, and presented in a way anyone can interpret and use in a reflective way for their own ends – the better. Context, discussion, and co-creation all matter when ‘landing’ principles in practice.

The future of Responsible Data must focus on shifting power in the data landscape, including around who is leading the charge and shaping the narrative about what Responsible Data looks like from policy to practice. We should perceive the acrobat stepping out not just as an INGO waving around their policy, but as individual staff members or partners making daily decisions about data. To support that judgement, we need to work collaboratively to emphasise the practical, principle-based day-to-day decisions, in order to see more clearly the tightrope ahead of us.

What Real Accountability in the Humanitarian Sector Can Look Like

Author: Gargi Sharma

Humanitarian organisations are bound by a duty to do no harm; however, sometimes in their bid to integrate data technologies into aid provision, they might end up doing [more harm than good](#).

Data breaches are one such instance. When these [occur in the humanitarian sector](#), very sensitive data can end up in the hands of potentially harmful actors. While some humanitarian organisations enjoy [immunity](#) from being held legally accountable, most do not; but there is also [no common understanding](#) of ‘accountability’ for accountability to be meaningful and actionable.

Due to the sensitive nature of the work and the commonly-held belief that humanitarians are ‘doing good’, humanitarian action has not been subject to regulation in the same ways as other sectors. In the absence of legal reporting requirements for data breaches, humanitarian accountability generally flows towards donors and member states, rather than towards beneficiaries of humanitarian aid

Humanitarian agencies are bound by their charters, their responsibilities as outlined by country agreements, and – for organisations without privileges and immunities – by domestic laws. There is often no requirement to inform beneficiaries that data collected from them or about them has been accessed, without authorisation, by a third party. In the case of organisations with immunity, even if the beneficiaries learn of a data breach they cannot sue the organisation for damages or reparations unless the organisation waives its immunity, which is exceedingly rare. In the case of organisations without immunity, the relative power of the organisation and a weak rule of law situation in many contexts can be a barrier to meaningful redress.

For the past eight years, the Responsible Data community has grappled with questions of ethics and accountability in the humanitarian sector, demanding that a breach not cause [further persecution](#). Members of the community have [mapped](#) responsible data practices in the humanitarian sector, called on international bodies to help create a safe and inclusive [digital future](#), created [resource guides](#) for safe and [responsible data](#)

[collection](#), and [formulated shared strategies](#) to uphold data ethics during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Community members have shown how to bring about greater transparency to data partnerships and promote new models of data protection [centring economic development](#). The community has advanced justice and rights-based approaches to responsibly handling beneficiary data and promoted an [equity-based framework](#). Community members have also uplifted children's rights by highlighting the need for [children's participation](#) to prevent harms across the data life cycle.

Members of the Responsible Data community have called on humanitarian agencies to acknowledge the possible [harms](#) caused by [humanitarian innovation](#) and the importance of [decolonising](#) humanitarian data practices, emphasising the need to protect [group data](#) as humanitarian situations often demand.

Now the question is: What can accountability look like? For humanitarian aid to move towards justice, agencies can address the power imbalance between givers and receivers. As notions of [consent](#) evolve in humanitarian contexts, so can notions of accountability.

Humanitarian aid beneficiaries can be integrated into the process of distributing aid, with real leadership and power in how their data is collected and utilised. In a paper titled "[Should international organisations include beneficiaries in decision-making? Arguments for mediated inclusion](#)," researcher Chris Tenove makes the case that according to the '[affected interests' principle](#), those impacted by governance decisions ought to be included in international organisations' decision-making processes. In the case of humanitarian data governance, beneficiaries' normative claim to inclusion would require a 'mediated inclusion', wherein representatives can make claims on beneficiaries' behalf and have a meaningful ability to influence decisions on data collection, processing and storage.

However, even in the absence of a legal requirement, humanitarians have the opportunity to disclose data breaches, offer support to affected data subjects, and promote transparency as they fix systems to maintain trust among beneficiaries. They can share how previous breaches were remedied and demonstrate how they are preparing to [mitigate against future harms](#) and adopting [safer data collection](#) practices, both during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

Humanitarian organisations can set up internal processes where complaints can be received [anonymously](#), to remedy the fear of backlash, and where both individual and group-level concerns are met. The [ICRC Data Protection Commission](#) offers an example of what has been done in this area.

To practice accountability to communities, humanitarian agencies can share and publicise [privacy impact assessments](#) prior to data collection, alongside their [plans](#) for responding to a breach. Agencies can spell out what responsibility looks like and outline actionable consequences for data breaches.

There is also an opportunity to engage in stronger external accountability. Donors can play an important role in setting [data policy priorities](#) and increasing compliance with [voluntary certification processes](#) that uphold core humanitarian standards. Such processes could include recurring recertification options, with mid-term reviews and final valuations by third parties.

Since the current accountability mechanisms still depend a great deal on individual action, there is an opportunity for internal and external bodies to take suo motu, or unprompted, action to review and report on a data breach. Community members have also recommended the creation of an [independent investigatory body](#) to examine the extent of legal harm caused by a data breach.

The humanitarian sector still relies on self-regulation and internal compliance. For this reason, grassroots-led accountability efforts can provide essential oversight and counterbalance (as Jennifer Easterday points out in her contribution to this collection). The Responsible Data community – composed of activists, scholars, and other experts – has provided useful guidance and support to humanitarian organisations’ processes over the years. Onwards and upwards to many more years of responsible and equitable data practices!

On Echo Chambers and Challenging Assumptions: Responsible Data in Fragile and Conflict Settings

Author: [Jennifer Easterday](#)

There has been a growing realisation that responsible data practices are important, need improvement, and can be especially critical in fragile and conflict settings. Decision-makers at international organisations in Brussels or New York or Geneva seem to understand that there is a systemic problem with responsible data in humanitarian settings. This is excellent, and is in part due to the diligent work of many members of the [Responsible Data community](#).

But although we now know that technology and data are not neutral, we must also recognise that what is meant by ‘responsible’ data is not neutral either.

Most of the discourse around responsible data in humanitarian contexts focuses on the relationship between aid providers and direct users or recipients of aid. Local NGOs, civil society and communities are not usually part of the conversation. And unfortunately, for all of the immense value of this community, they are not often part of our conversations, either. This reflects and exacerbates deeply-rooted power imbalances and top-down engagement strategies, reinforcing existing silos and echo chambers.

Take, for example, the need for additional data in this field. We recognise that to ‘do no harm’ [we need to learn what the harms actually are](#). And we readily admit that so far, we have tended to act based on what we think the risks are.

As [Ben Parker rightly argues](#), this is cause for data professionals to ask themselves, “Have we even thought of all the possible ways this could go wrong and, if we haven’t, who could help us think it through?” There is a plethora of helpful guidelines on data in humanitarian contexts. They include the [Principles for Digital Development](#), the Harvard [Signal Code](#), UN OCHA’s report on [Humanitarian Data Ethics](#), and the ICRC’s [Handbook on Data Protection in Humanitarian Action](#). But, as Parker argues, guidelines are not enough, and data professionals need to be personally dedicated to a responsible data approach.

And they must also take concrete steps to make sure that their responsible data approach reflects the values of affected communities. To be ‘responsible’, data practitioners must meaningfully engage with civil society or community leaders in humanitarian contexts – especially those who are most impacted by humanitarian data practices – to help them understand all of the possible ways they could go wrong.

So while it is true that there urgently needs to be more research and evidence in this area, these must be grounded in participatory and inclusive methods that center the perspectives of local communities. Otherwise, we cannot arrive at an understanding of what responsible data means in these contexts.

How can we do this in practice? [Taking a justice-centered approach](#), as reflected by innovative work on [design justice](#), [applied data justice](#), or [data feminism](#) is a useful starting point for improving responsible data practice. These diverse approaches have a common base of good practices, including:

1. Designing collective solutions
2. Accounting for [structural inequities and power relations](#)
3. Focusing on marginalised people and communities [whose knowledge and data often get ignored](#)
4. Considering [the political economy of knowledge production](#)
5. Ensuring meaningful participation in decisions, and
6. Recognising community-based traditions, knowledge, and practices.

It is imperative to be continuously challenging our own assumptions about what ‘responsible data’ means in fragile and conflict settings by listening to and learning from affected communities. We need to start mainstreaming these concepts into our work, internal and external advocacy, and day-to-day decision-making.

This likely requires a community re-think, and an opportunity to streamline our definition of what a justice-centered approach to responsible data looks like. It will also require a concerted effort to reach beyond our networks, set aside time and budget for inclusive consultations, and to become comfortable with shifting our programmatic plans – sometimes perhaps radically – to incorporate diverse views into responsible data work.

Author: [Linda Raftree](#)

Monitoring, evaluation, research and learning (MERL) are by nature data-heavy activities. It makes sense, then, that over the past decade, the use of digital technology and digital data have permeated the practice of MERL. In the social change sphere (humanitarian aid, development work, human rights, and program areas such as health, education, social protection, and protection overall), much of the data that we collect when conducting MERL comes from at-risk populations or underrepresented populations. This data influences decisions to support these same populations to access rights and services. It also tells us whether or not our interventions have worked and for whom. For this reason, a responsible data approach that takes data ethics and data protection into account is an imperative for MERL.

Around 2013 or so, the use of digital tools and platforms to support MERL began to claim more attention among a small set of ‘early adopter’ MERL practitioners. We began seeing mobile devices used to collect data and as a way to encourage community feedback on programs. The use of satellite data and participatory mapping projects became more prominent, and there was great hope placed on crowdsourcing, and citizen journalism for gathering insights. In 2014, Michael Bamberger and I took a closer look, laying out [an initial landscape of digital approaches to monitoring and evaluation](#).

At the same time, following [a discussion on the ethics of participatory mapping](#), a group of practitioners – including The Engine Room’s founders – assembled to look more closely at ethics in technology for development. We were concerned that development agencies were pushing innovation and technology in development while being largely unaware of data ethics, privacy and security issues that could expose individuals and communities to risk. Our [First MERL Tech Conference](#) also happened that year.

When adoption of innovation is used as the principal indicator of success or failure, the wider positive or negative ramifications including unintended benefits, costs and risks are likely to be overlooked, as noted by [Glover](#).

Close overlap with the Responsible Data community has helped ensure that the MERL Tech community continuously reflects on these concerns. We have created a space for dialog and discussion between tech developers, early adopters of technology in MERL, privacy and ethics advocates, and those who are newly learning about how technology can enable MERL. This has allowed the sector to improve its use of digital data, to highlight potential negative outcomes for vulnerable groups, and to introduce approaches to mitigate the harm that can come from the collection and use of MERL data.

The Responsible Data and MERL Tech communities have together explored a number of specific areas of concern, including [consent in the digital age](#), [developing responsible data policies](#), and [operationalising responsible data policies](#). And as the MERL Tech community has matured, discussions about RD have moved from the margins to the center.

Over the years, we've seen heated debates about the potential for harm and unintended consequences stemming from digital approaches or from [partnerships whose value and ethics are questioned](#). Together, the MERL Tech and RD communities have advocated for ethical frameworks and better research on the potential for technologies and digital data collection and use to do harm. For example, research by [Oxfam and The Engine Room](#) on balancing the risks and benefits of using biometrics in the humanitarian field has helped to shape how we think about the role of emerging technology. We also co-curate a [Responsible Data Resource List](#), which lives on the MERL Tech site and on the RD website. Key to these discussions has been the active and lively community debate that happens on the RD listserv and during events by both organisations, and the additional discussions that have taken place on these themes at the [New York City Technology Salons](#). This constant reflection on the responsibilities of MERL professionals to use data in ethical and responsible ways has strengthened the MERL Tech space.

While collective progress is being made in documenting and assessing technology-enabled MERL initiatives and good practice guidelines are emerging, ethical questions related to these new and emerging methods and approaches remain. In 2022, we are talking about much more than mobile data gathering, mapping and crowdsourcing, as we explored in a series of [MERL Tech State of the Field reports](#). Alongside more [traditional uses of digital tools and data](#), we also see ['big data' and predictive analytics](#) sitting squarely in the MERL space. [Emerging tools and technologies](#) such

as blockchain, artificial intelligence and machine learning, new forms of data storage, text and voice analytics, biometrics, non-traditional data and metadata are now being explored as part of the MERL toolbox. Collaboration with the RD community helps the MERL Tech community ensure that we are looking at the ethics and RD issues that come with new and emerging approaches to MERL.

[Going forward](#), the MERL Tech community is addressing the fallout of COVID-19, which has made the use of digital technologies for remote MERL and [remote monitoring](#) even more relevant. In 2020, building on a [Responsible Data in MERL during COVID-19](#) event series (co-hosted with the CLEAR Center in Anglophone Africa), we convened a [Responsible Data in M&E \(RDIME\) working group and community of practice](#) that focused on these issues in the African context. Members of the working group developed [guidance on data governance and responsible data practices for MERL](#) with a focus on African contexts. We will also continue our focus on documenting, sharing, learning, training, and offering guidance on how to improve rigor, validity, representativeness and inclusion, how to better safeguard vulnerable individuals and groups, and how to assess new approaches and methods to ensure that ethics and safeguarding are included in MERL design and implementation.

Ultimately, we hope our two communities will continue to collaborate in order to strengthen the MERL sector through intentional, responsible, and ethical approaches to technology and digital data.

A Human Rights-Based Approach to Data

Author: [Thobekile Matimbe](#)

As the lives people live in the digital age are increasingly enjoyed online, the role of the internet becomes more pressing for human dignity. In the past, for people to eat, they had to physically go to the shops. In today's world, you simply order a meal online via applications which take your personal information on registration and refresh your memory when you want to make an order. But how safe is data in the hands of the social media, tech or telecommunications companies? This article looks generally at data protection in Africa.

From the initial point of registration for getting a sim card or joining an online platform, it is critical to figure out who holds the power of information. Apart from all the data that is collected by online platforms, in places like Kenya and Zimbabwe mobile money is what sustains economic livelihoods, and telecommunications companies collect large amounts of data from clients who expect that their information is secure.

Data breaches have been witnessed in countries across the globe. [A report on the top 15 biggest data breaches of the 21st century](#) lists platforms like Canva, Equifax, and LinkedIn, all of whom have had data breaches in the past seven years. [Complaints have been made against Google and other tech companies](#). Data breaches happen without the consent of data subjects, and in violation of their privacy.

While national constitutions prescribe that governments have a duty to protect human rights, business entities have increasingly been part of the threat to privacy. In the absence of domestic laws that secure personal data, violations of privacy remain unchecked. In some instances, companies have been weaponized by states through disclosure of the troves of information they keep on data subjects.

But over the past seven years, there has also been steady growth in the development of guidelines for data protection, necessitated by the need to place safeguards on how the private sector utilises the data it collects in a manner that respects human rights.

South Africa's Information Regulator, for example, recently [called for Facebook to seek consent when making use of information collected from the Whatsapp messaging platform](#), in a bid to protect the privacy of many users.

The [European General Data Protection Regulation \(GDPR\)](#) came into effect on 25 May 2018 to harmonise data protection laws in Europe. It sets out that protection of the processing of personal data is a fundamental right, echoing article 8(1) of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and article 16(1) of the treaty on the functioning of the European Union that everyone has the right to protection of personal data concerning himself or herself.

The GDPR has set the tone for data protection in Africa, given that most private companies collecting data in Africa are affiliated to Europe hence falling within the ambit of the regulation. The GDPR promotes the need for informed consent when the data subject has their information collected, and private companies who breach privacy run the risk of being fined which acts as a safeguard.

While this is progressive, a more substantial remedy would be found in homegrown regional frameworks. With its slow pace in ratifying the African Union Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection (the Malabo Convention), Africa is lagging behind.

Though the treaty, which lays a foundation for data protection in Africa, was adopted in June 2014 – before the GDPR – it needs to be ratified by 15 countries before it can come into force; though it has, in the meantime, inspired [data protection laws within some African countries](#).

The common thread between the GDPR and the Malabo Convention is a human-rights-based approach to handling data. Like the GDPR, the Malabo Convention also provides for the punishment of any violations. Basic principles laid out include the principle of consent and legitimacy as well as the principle of transparency of personal data processing.

Both the GDPR and the Malabo Convention articulate that a data subject has the right to be 'forgotten' on a particular platform and to object to the processing of their personal data in certain ways.

As digital citizenry grows, so too does the risk to privacy and, most pertinently, the need for the protection of personal data. In ensuring adequate data protection in Africa, the following measures must be taken:

- There is a need for responsible data handling that ensures transparency from private companies on how they process data. As laid out in the Responsible Data community's [Responsible Data Principles](#), just because data can be used in a certain way does not mean it should be. Private companies must be guided by policies that ensure consent is sought for the processing of information collected.
- [States that have not ratified the Malabo Convention must do so](#), to bring it into operation.
- States without data protection laws must enact them and provide deterrent penalties and guidelines to guard against data breaches.

In Africa, it is critical that data protection is prioritised both by states and by private companies. The Malabo Convention is a comprehensive treaty which needs to be ratified domesticated and relied upon to regulate the use of personal data by private companies in Africa: a homegrown solution is readily accessible.

Polls, Protest and Participation: A Changing Landscape in Public Engagement and Responsible Data

Author: [Aidan Peppin](#)

In 2020, the Ada Lovelace Institute convened a series of workshops to discuss social and ethical issues related to data-driven biometrics technologies (such as [facial recognition](#)) with a selected, demographically diverse [group of 50 members of the UK public](#).

During the final workshop, held in October, the group presented a set of recommendations to a panel of expert policymakers, lawyers, regulators and technologists.

In the panel's responses to the recommendations, one statement stood out:

“One of the constant concerns that everybody has [around public engagement] is the extent to which ordinary people can understand issues and form opinions about them. What’s really impressive in this work is that people who don’t necessarily have expertise, experience or some knowledge in this area to begin with can give really clear and informed decisions about what they want from this kind of technology.”

In this comment, the speaker unknowingly reflected a significant shift that has occurred around public engagement on data issues in recent years. Only a handful of years ago, ‘data’ was considered by many as a topic too dry, too complex, too important to be left to public opinion. But as irresponsible data practices have caused social harm and created controversy, the landscape has shifted dramatically, and it has become clear that a topic as complex and important as data must, in fact, be addressed through meaningful engagement with people and with society.

Controversies like the [Cambridge Analytica](#) and [Clearview AI](#) scandals have unveiled the scale of irresponsible data practices and the influence these practices can have on people and society. These have coincided with the rise and rise of big tech platforms, which have become embedded in every aspect of our daily lives – so much so that [living without them is near impossible](#).

Many people have realised how little agency they have to influence the data-driven systems they use every day, leaving them to [reluctantly accept](#) the presence of Google, Facebook, Amazon and other data-hungry companies in their lives. As a result, data rights have moved to the fore of public consciousness.

At the same time we've seen how [bias and racial discrimination](#) are augmented through technologies built on poor data; how badly designed algorithms have resulted in [unfair outcomes for school students](#); and how many people feel that big tech platforms' [power and profits have grown too much](#).

But we've also seen other important – and more positive – shifts. There's been a rise in participatory democracy projects like citizens' assemblies and juries, focused on [tech issues](#) as well as broader social issues like [climate change](#). Surveys about people's attitudes to technology, like the one my colleagues ran in 2019 on [facial recognition](#), are gaining more attention from policymakers and technology developers. There are a growing number of community-driven initiatives to empower people with data, like [data coops](#) and [citizen data initiatives](#). And there's an increase in resistance to harmful technologies and invasive data practices, from [successful legal cases](#) raised by members of the public, to [student-led protests](#).

In whatever form resistance and engagement take – whether polling, protest or participation – it's clear that not only are more and more people willing to engage on data issues, but that they also bring with them valuable knowledge and experience. There's also a greater capacity in many governments and organisations to listen to and respond to public engagement initiatives, in recognition of the fact that people's actions and views often shine light on what's broken and how to fix it.

This rise in resistance and participation on data issues is a direct response to the growing power of big tech and big data, and marks how people and communities are trying to regain influence, not just over their own data, but over how data is used more generally: to ensure it's used responsibly and for the good of society.

All this has been accelerated by the pandemic, culminating in a year in which the largest tech companies have consolidated their power and dominance, and in which people have felt even more powerless over data, despite [antitrust cases](#) and calls to tighten regulation. But people are still engaging,

whether [virtually](#) or in [person](#), to help raise awareness around, and shine light on, the places where data practices are not working for people and society. The protests, the community organising, and the increasing political will to support and listen to people and communities all suggest that the public have a huge and vital role to play in shaping the future of data policy and practice.

Scholars of the public understanding of science have described how the way we view public engagement with technology varies between a limited '[deficit model](#)' – which assumes people lack the knowledge needed to develop informed opinions on technology – to more effective models that recognise the much more complex relationship between people and tech. In recent years we've seen a positive shift from the former to the latter when it comes to engagement with issues around responsible data.

Tech may shape the world around us, but people and society shape technology too. Amid growing awareness around data issues, kindling resistance against irresponsible data practices and strengthening the will to build a better world are all the ingredients necessary for public engagement to be a critical component in creating and implementing responsible data practices and policies.

Technological Refusal When Our Bodies Are at Stake

Author: Seeta Peña Gangadharan

As someone who writes and thinks extensively about technological refusal – contesting sociotechnical systems – in marginalised communities in the US, I should not have been surprised by an issue in my own backyard in the past year. But I was.

As it turns out, Ocado, a company that the UK considers to be one of its finest, most innovative firms (a '[Microsoft of retail](#)'), plans to operate a depot directly behind the primary school attended by my children. Ocado [plans to fulfill thousands of online grocery orders](#) at this depot, meaning hundreds of delivery trucks would traverse the area daily.

Local residents worry about the impacts of noise, air, and light pollution not only on the children who attend this school, but also on everyone living in the surrounding area. In late 2020, thanks to the pleas of local residents, the local council revoked the planning license of the tech company. Ocado is determined to move ahead, however. After a court affirmed the legality of license revocation, the company is moving to appeal the decision. Whatever Ocado pushes, the company faces fierce opposition from outraged residents.

A stance of adversarialism and contestation feels all the more urgent to take these days. Like [countless examples](#) that Our Data Bodies – the project I co-founded and co-lead – has surfaced, this case exemplifies the bully tactics and coercive logics of tech companies. Let us do what we want, or be damned. Our Data Bodies has talked to marginalised people in Charlotte, Detroit, and Los Angeles about their experiences with data collection, data-driven systems, and the people and institutions that manage them. And in the case of the Ocado depot, I see a familiar fighting response: Hell no... we deserve better than you.

If I understand the responsible data community correctly, it urges that data collection, data analysis, and data-driven decisions be done/made in ways that recognise context and history, including histories of oppression or injustice. Responsible data advocates connect with data-for-good efforts, stress ethics, and sustainability and accountability, and emphasise justice and equity at each stage in the life cycle of data-driven systems.

Our Data Bodies recognises and engages in this kind of work: just this past fall, Tawana Petty and Tamika Lewis, both co-founding members, contributed to [A Toolkit Centering Racial Equity throughout Data Integration](#). Work of this nature will remain important and necessary to challenging systemic and institutionalised oppression.

On top of this, the current political and economic climate demands attention to countering the power of sovereign technologies. Companies that make [optimisation technologies](#) – technological systems that constantly suck up data about us and adjust or optimise services on the basis thereof – have us in the palm of their hand. They get us hooked on a service and then act with impunity, making them the sovereign power over our daily habits.

Thanks to increased demand for virtual services, during the Covid-19 pandemic the power of these companies [has skyrocketed](#). Tech CEOs and tech companies have taken advantage of a health crisis to drive demand, deploy technological infrastructures, and lock in users.

Many of these users have been people ensconcing themselves at home waiting for their online grocery deliveries or remote health diagnoses – consumers and citizens. But perhaps even more significantly, users have also included state institutions pressured to offer online services, including automated government services, on short notice. As Julia Glidden, Worldwide Public Sector CVP at Microsoft, [said](#), “We can do virtually any interaction with the government in our pajamas... and what we can do now is do it at scale.” Indeed, in Europe and the United States – the two places I know best – education, health, policing, and other basic public services now rely on a combination of digital self-service, online service delivery, predictive analytics, and remote diagnostics.

From citizens and consumers to governments, users fully depend on tech companies to keep them afloat (those who lie out of reach of tech infrastructure are dependent too – though instead of using tech to stay afloat they are fully left behind). As dependence on tech infrastructure deepens, state and private actors are normalising surveillance – making it seem inevitable, unavoidable, common sense.

Citizens and consumers are encouraged to adopt or accept real-time automated services, like ‘smart’ doorbells at home and facial recognition cameras on the street. The increased demand for these services drives more surveillance, with tech suppliers able to fine-tune what user data they monitor and process.

Similarly, in the workplace, employers now routinely monitor worker productivity, whether employees are based at home or on-site. Health-status monitoring is the most common amongst these practices, though performance management is also widespread.

Low-wage workers at Amazon, for example, can [face a constant state of anxiety](#), with some being subjected to a pack-rate target of 60 to 90 boxes per hour. High(er)-wage workers experience workplace surveillance in different ways, but arguably with as much anxiety, as employers institute monitoring software designed to measure productivity or, in some cases, to detect employee actions for which the company could be legally liable.

At stake is no less than our bodies – where we can move, how we can move, who we can move with. Take [iris scan technology](#), for example. Tech evangelists in the humanitarian field justify it as a means of deterring fraud and waste in humanitarian assistance. For the past decade, the push towards scanning the irises of refugees has grown alongside the idea that humanitarian assistance needs to be optimised. In 2020, UNHCR reported [wide scale implementation of iris scanning in refugee programs](#) in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Zambia, and Malawi, and smaller scale or pilot programs in Costa Rica, Greece, Burundi, Iran, and Rwanda. Today, iris scanning of refugees is expanding to food assistance.

These systems' focus on optimisation is a familiar story in a neoliberal state – and certainly one on display in the [earlier research](#) we did with Our Data Bodies. They trade empathy for efficiency, and privacy and dignity for access to basic needs. By limiting daily interactions to a set of participating providers, they narrow a path of choices and opportunities for self-development, let alone self-determination.

While iris scan technology might be a long time coming in mainstream consumer, citizen, or employee settings, the infrastructural logic that they embrace travels easily to other contexts. Given how central technology has become to the post-Covid state, it may be only a matter of time before 'stimulus' payments or universal basic income is mediated through a locked-in system architecture.

But the supremacy of these systems is not a done deal, and there are kinks in the armor of sovereign tech. I see hope in the continued work of [Our Data Bodies](#), [kindred groups](#), and [inspiring movements](#), and in my own backyard, in the court decision against Ocado. Let's hope the future brings more successes like these.

Re-Imagining a Responsible Approach to Informed Consent

Author: Paola Verhaert

Earlier in 2021, Human Rights Watch published a report about [UNHCR's improper collection and sharing of data pertaining to Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh](#), in which they found that the agency failed to conduct a full data impact assessment, as its own policies require. In some cases, the report shows, UNHCR had failed to obtain refugees' free and informed consent to share their data with Myanmar, the country they had fled. The report sparked a discussion on the Responsible Data listserv about informed consent.

This was not the first time – and will probably not be the last time – that the topic of informed consent has taken centre stage in discussions among the RD community. Since its inception, the RD community has tried to grapple with the ethical challenges that the reliance on informed consent as a legitimate basis for data collection presents, particularly (though not exclusively) in the humanitarian aid sector.

The promises and perils of informed consent in data processing

At its heart, [informed consent is about upholding dignity for individuals and communities involved](#), regardless of who is doing the data collection – whether researchers, governments or aid organisations.

In many cases, humanitarian organisations rely on informed consent from the communities they serve to legitimise the collection and use of their information. The emergence of new technologies, however – combined with a rapid increase in the amounts of beneficiary data collected – [has heightened and widened concerns about the validity of informed consent in this context](#).

Back in 2014, in the early days of the budding RD community, a small group of members came together to discuss [what consent policies for civil society organisations can and should look like](#), recognising the thorniness of this topic. Not long after, the community explored the role of informed consent in crowdsourced and user-generated data for advocacy at a [Responsible Data](#)

[Forum in Nairobi](#), organised in partnership with Amnesty International. In many ways, the [questions related to informed consent that emerged at this RDF](#) still resonate today, as participants discussed its relation to technology, duty of care, and the education of data subjects.

Seven years later, for the RD community these questions are still front of mind as we see examples of how data collection processes are insufficiently seeking informed consent of individuals whose data is being collected. Recent research has highlighted how data collection processes fail to take into account the particular experiences of vulnerable communities, and to integrate contextual interpretations of informed consent within these communities. [Dragana Kaurin conducted research](#) into the collection and use of personal data of refugees who arrived in Europe since 2013 and found that informed consent is rarely sought. When conducting research with migrants and refugees arriving in Italy in 2019, [Data & Society](#) noted that “there is a lack of meaningful informed consent in the collection of information from migrants and refugees,” and that, consequently, migrants may not be truly giving meaningful consent due to cultural differences, knowledge gaps, or power inequalities. Recent [research by The Engine Room](#) on the lived experiences of marginalised communities with digital ID systems in five countries also showed how informed consent processes were lacking in providing refugees with clear and accessible information about the processing of their personal data.

In many of these cases, informed consent fails to take into account the specific contexts and needs of the communities at hand; particularly in environments with stark power imbalances, standard approaches to informed consent have proven to be insufficient in empowering these communities to exercise their agency. Ultimately, if an individual is not made aware of the implications of their choice or cannot say no, then consent to data processing cannot be regarded as valid.

Re-imagining our approach to informed consent

Seeking consent in a way that ensures those providing consent actually have the information, agency, control and alternatives they need and are entitled to is a key part of using data responsibly. However, if power asymmetries between those doing the collecting and those from whom data is collected prohibit the implementation of free and informed consent processes, can we consider informed consent a legitimate basis for data collection at all?

As we continue to tackle this question within the RD community, we have witnessed how organisations are starting to recognise the limitations of informed consent. In a recent blog post that accompanied the publication of their biometrics policy, the ICRC wrote that in “rendering its data processing as transparent as possible to its beneficiaries and affected populations, it does not believe that consent provides a legally valid basis for data processing in many emergency situations.”

As we continue to re-imagine the place of informed consent in the humanitarian space, we hope the RD community can continue to provide a space where practitioners can discuss what informed consent could, or should, look like in the future.

The Seven Principles of Data Feminism

Author: Catherine d’Ignazio and Lauren Klein

In November 2015, Catherine, who was based out of the MIT Media Lab at the time, was invited by Mushon Zer-Aviv to write [a blog post](#) for the Responsible Data Forum – an event he was co-organising for January 2016. At the same time, Lauren, who was working at Georgia Tech in Atlanta, was preparing to travel to the NULab at Northeastern University, in Boston, to give [a talk on some new research](#). Unbeknownst to each other, both of us had decided to focus on the same unusual topic: feminist data visualisation. Struck by the coincidence, a mutual friend put us in touch, and we soon began planning a collaboration.

Our first work together was a short paper, [Feminist Data Visualisation](#), which was in many ways inspired by the conversations and design workshops about ethics in visualisation that took place at the Responsible Data Forum. But as we continued to develop the concept, in conversation with each other and within our respective communities of practice, we realised that a feminist data visualisation, or any data visualisation, represents the output of a much longer and more complicated set of processes.

We also realised that a feminist approach to data visualisation would need to consider the social, political, and historical context in which these processes took place. And so the concept of feminist data visualization evolved into [data feminism](#): a way of thinking about data, data systems, and data science that is informed by the rich history of feminist activism and feminist critical thought.

Data feminism begins with a belief in gender equality, and a recognition that achieving equality for people of all genders requires a commitment to examining the root cause of the inequalities that certain groups face today.

Data feminism is not only about women. It takes more than one gender to have gender inequality and more than one gender to work toward justice. Similarly, data feminism isn’t only for women. Many men, nonbinary people and genderqueer people are proud to call themselves feminists and use feminism in their work.

Furthermore, data feminism isn't only about gender. Intersectional feminists like [Kimberlé Crenshaw](#), [bell hooks](#) and the [Combahee River Collective](#) have taught us how race, class, sexuality, ability, age, religion, geography, and more are factors that work together to influence each person's experiences and opportunities in the world. Intersectional feminism also teaches us that these experiences and opportunities (or the lack of opportunities, as the case may be) are the result of larger structural forces of power, which must be challenged and changed. In our contemporary world, data is power too. And because the power of data is wielded unjustly, it too must be challenged and changed.

Underlying this commitment to challenging power is a belief in co-liberation: the idea that oppressive systems harm all of us, that they undermine the quality and validity of all of our work, and that they hinder all of us from creating true and lasting social impact. To guide us in this project, we have developed seven core principles. Individually and together, these principles emerge from a foundation in intersectional feminist thought.

The seven principles of data feminism are as follows:

- **Examine power.** Data feminism begins by analysing how power operates in the world.
- **Challenge power.** Data feminism commits to challenging unequal power structures and working toward justice.
- **Elevate emotion and embodiment.** Data feminism teaches us to value multiple forms of knowledge, including the knowledge that comes from people as living, feeling bodies in the world.
- **Rethink binaries and hierarchies.** Data feminism requires us to challenge the gender binary, along with other systems of counting and classification that perpetuate oppression
- **Embrace pluralism.** Data feminism insists that the most complete knowledge comes from synthesising multiple perspectives, with priority given to local, Indigenous, and experiential ways of knowing.
- **Consider context.** Data feminism asserts that data is not neutral or objective. It is the product of unequal social relations, and this context is essential for conducting accurate, ethical analysis.
- **Make labour visible.** The work of data science, like all work in the world, is the work of many hands. Data feminism makes this labour visible so that it can be recognised and valued.

In our book, [Data Feminism](#) (MIT Press, 2020), we explore each of these principles in more detail, drawing upon examples from the field of data science, expansively defined to show how that principle can be put into action.

Along the way, we introduce key feminist concepts like the [matrix of domination](#) (Patricia Hill Collins), [situated knowledge](#) (Donna Haraway), and [emotional labour](#) (Arlie Hochschild), as well as some of our own ideas about what data feminism looks like in theory and practice. To this end, we introduce readers to a range of folks at the cutting edge of data and justice. These include [engineers](#) and [software developers](#), [activists](#) and [community organisers](#), [data journalists](#), [artists](#), and [scholars](#).

This variety of people, and the variety of projects they have created or helped to create, is our way of answering the question: What makes a data science project feminist? As we assert, a data science project may be feminist in content, in that it challenges power by choice of subject matter; in form, in that it challenges power by shifting the aesthetic and/or sensory registers of data communication; and/or in process, in that it challenges power by building participatory, inclusive processes of knowledge production. What unites this broad scope of data work is a commitment to action and a desire to remake the world to be more equitable and inclusive.

Our overarching goal is to take a stand against the status quo – against a world that unfairly benefits rich white cisgender heterosexual non-disabled white men from the global north at the expense of others.

Our principles are intended to function as concrete steps to action for data scientists seeking to learn how feminism can help them work toward justice, and for feminists seeking to learn how their own work can carry over to the growing field of data science. They are also addressed to professionals in all fields in which data-driven decisions are being made, as well as to communities that want to resist or mobilise the data that surrounds them.

They are written for everyone who seeks to better understand the charts and statistics that they encounter in their day-to-day lives, and for everyone who seeks to communicate the significance of such charts and statistics to others.

Borrowing from [bell hooks](#), we say: data feminism is for everyone. Data feminism is for people of all genders. It's by people of all genders. And most importantly: it's about much more than gender. Data feminism is about power, about who has it and who doesn't, and about how those differentials of power can be challenged and changed.

More About Data Feminism

Data Feminism is an open access book published by MIT Press in 2020. You can read it for free online at <https://data-feminism.mitpress.mit.edu/> or buy it from your local independent bookstore.

Responsibly Visualising a Pandemic of Invisible Proportions

Author: [Mushon Zer-Aviv](#)

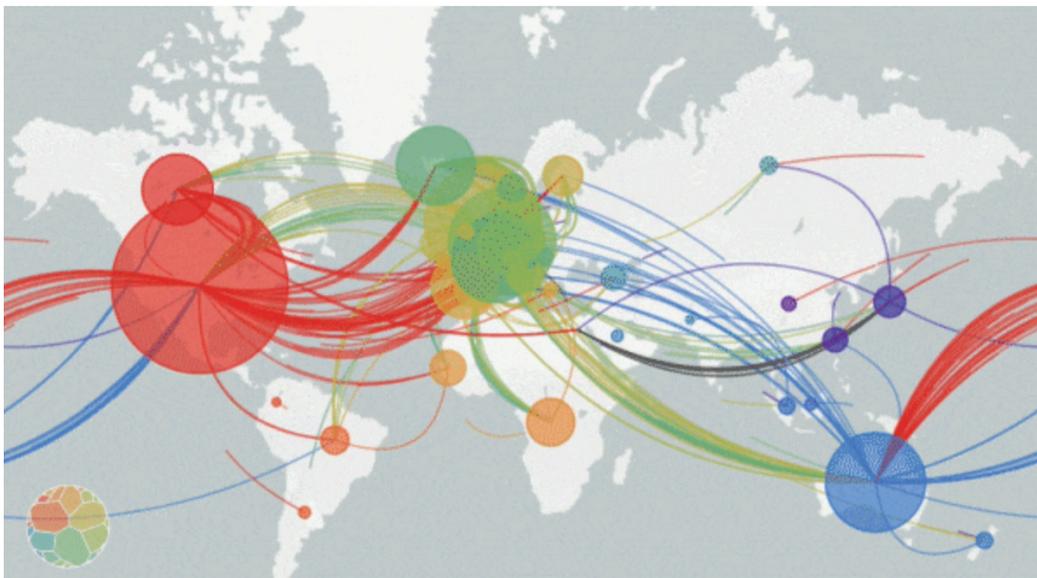
This article was written in March 2021.

In the past decade we have found ourselves living with more and more data. Networked technologies have made us live more and more *through* data. But in the last year or so, the global pandemic has led to us living more and more as data; and proved that data visualisation – and using it responsibly – is more critical than ever before.

Covid-19 has had an unprecedented global impact, yet this impact is literally invisible. After killing more than 2.5 million people in every corner of the world in one year, we still have no clear visual representation for how the virus has affected people's lives. This has become an opportunity and a calling for data visualisation – to expose the invisible.

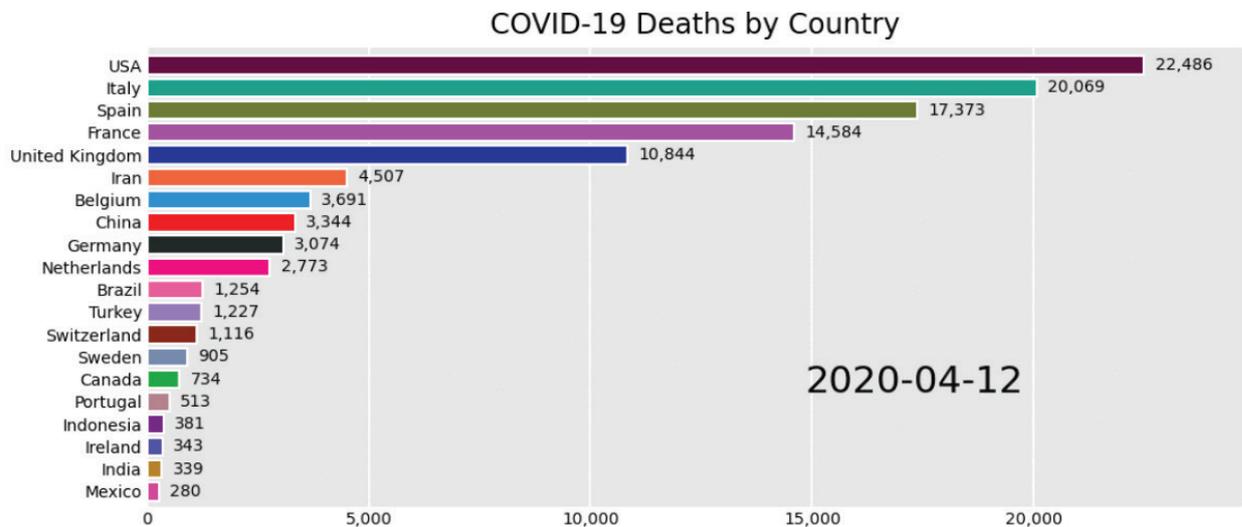
Points on a map

Back in January 2020, the initial epidemiological maps being published in the news still felt to most western eyes like yet another health report about some disease in a faraway place. But these Wuhan-centered maps were quickly zoomed out as more spots were added around the globe.



Pandemic nationalism

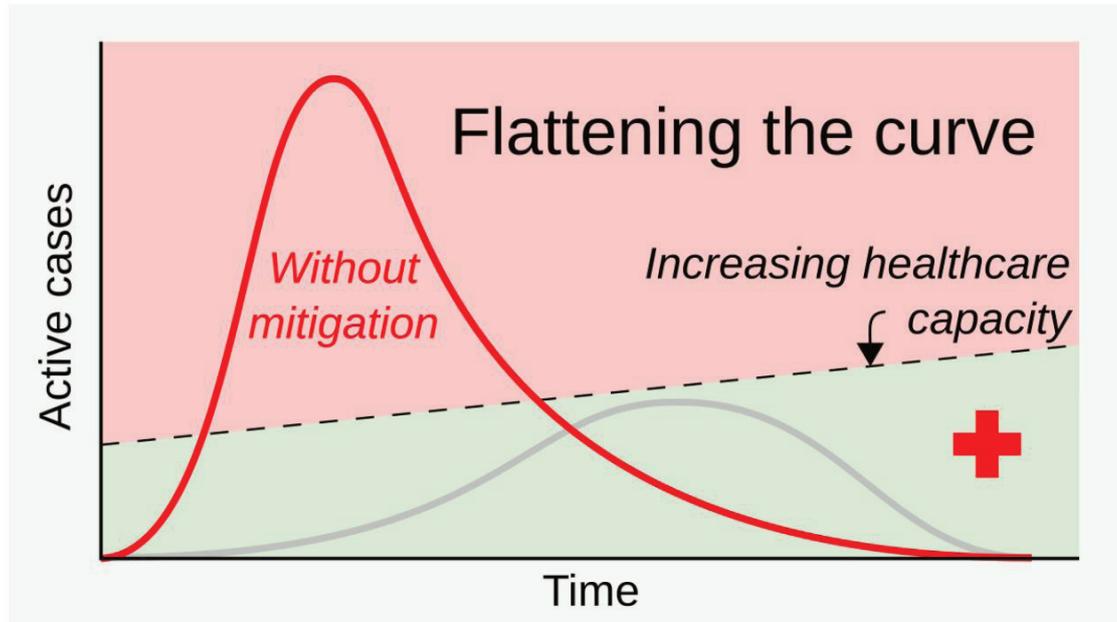
When governments began refusing visas based on infection levels, the pandemic started its national phase. This was also when media outlets started presenting, through visualisations, national ‘horse races’ signalling the pandemic’s epicenter du-jour. Travel restricted ‘world citizens’ were once more defined by their nationality and the boundaries of their public health authorities. Maps and other nationality-focused charts attempted to visualise the global state of the pandemic, and ideally inform measures and share best practices to curb local outbreaks. But with different data collection approaches, health systems and political interests, the simplified national comparison provided by many of these visualisations often served to reinforce broad generalisations – for example, about the unique cultures and national characters of Chinese people, Italians, or Americans – but it offered little insight to inform either personal protection or public policy.



The daily national death race

Beyond the curve

‘Flattening the curve’ became an immediate icon as a public call to arms, and was possibly the single most influential chart of the pandemic. The chart presented two possible scenarios for the spread of the pandemic and showed how an unmitigated response could quickly overwhelm health systems (while both the concept and the chart are [not new](#), this public health approach didn’t make it into the public discourse until March 2020). ‘Flattening the curve’ charts helped mobilise the public to embrace face masks and public distancing, and served as the model for data-driven discussions around more severe measures like quarantines and lockdowns.



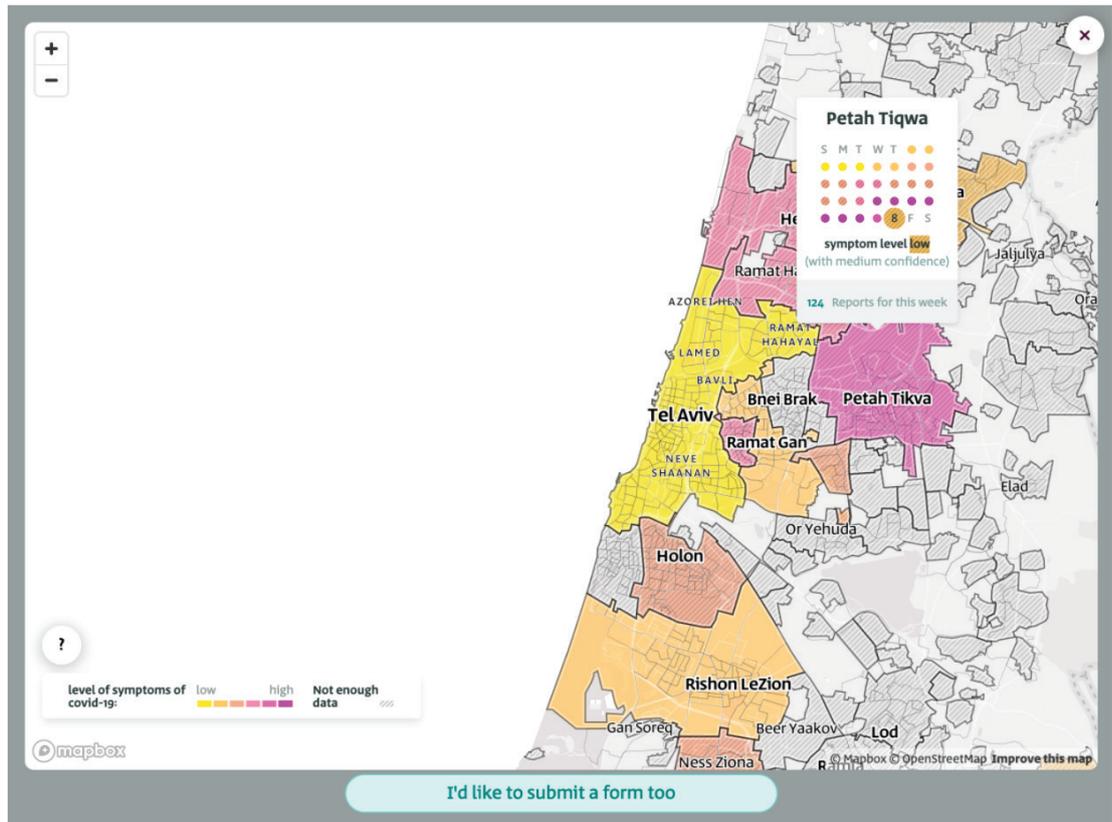
While the chart was a useful starting point, later iterations suggested we should also be working to ‘raise the line’ (representing health systems’ capacities, which had been mostly represented in a fixed, horizontal way) – but in most cases, this second call to action didn’t make it into the chart.

Additionally, the decreasing slopes of both curves generated false expectations of a single major peak that we would only need to cross once. In reality, however, many places have been through multiple additional surges, and new mutations of the virus have made later curves even higher than earlier ones.

How to track everybody, everywhere, every day?

These famous curves depict the number of confirmed cases. But this number doesn’t represent all the people who may be asymptomatic, but still infectious. To effectively prevent outbreaks, infected individuals have to be identified even before they are symptomatic enough to get tested. However, the continuous personal health and location surveillance needed to do this would potentially impede on our very basic civil liberties.

I personally helped develop a daily consensual self-reporting tool for early symptoms. We avoided collecting precise geographic data, but at a certain point the researchers and I started to doubt the accuracy of our approach. Siding with more privacy and less accuracy was not an obvious tradeoff to make when it jeopardised our ability to stop an outbreak before it hit the community.



[CoronaIsrael.org](https://www.coronaisrael.org) - map showing geographic analysis (and uncertainty) of self reported early symptoms

We made a point of presenting our analysis transparently back to those reporting daily, and we attempted to communicate the uncertainties involved on our maps, but in the end the nuances of uncertain aggregated data that informed the research proved far less insightful or actionable for the individuals reporting it.

Body counts

As numbers soared and government responses varied, journalists struggled to communicate the magnitude of the damage. In the US specifically, daily newspapers devoted front pages to ‘data obituaries’ that augmented the overwhelming statistics with human stories. These were noble attempts to humanise numbers, but [it is still not clear](#) whether we can grasp large numbers and empathise with individual stories simultaneously.

"All the News That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times

Late Edition

Today, plenty of sunshine, chilly, high 36. Tonight, increasing cloudiness, low 29. Tomorrow, intervals of snow and rain, little to no accumulation, high 41. Weather map, Page 30.

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\$6.00

U.S. VIRUS DEATHS NEARING 500,000 IN JUST ONE YEAR

MORE THAN IN 3 WARS

Empty Spaces in Cities, Towns, Restaurants, Homes and Hearts

By JULIE BOSMAN
CHICAGO — A nation numbed by misery and loss is confronting a number that still has the power to shock: 500,000.

Roughly one year since the first known death by the coronavirus in the United States, an unfathomable toll is nearing — the loss of half a million people.

No other country has counted so many deaths in the pandemic. More Americans have perished from Covid-19 than on the battlefields of World War I, World War II and the Vietnam War combined.

The milestone comes at a hopeful moment: New virus cases are down sharply, deaths are slowing and vaccines are steadily being administered.

But there is concern about emerging variants of the virus, and it may be months before the pandemic is contained.

Each death has left untold numbers of mourners, a ripple effect of loss that has swept over towns and cities. Each death has left an empty space in communities across America: a bar stool where a regular used to sit, one side of a bed unslept in, a home kitchen without its cook.

The living find themselves amid vacant places once occupied by their spouses, parents, neighbors and friends — the nearly 500,000 coronavirus dead.

In Chicago, the Rev. Ezra Jones stands at his pulpit on Sundays, letting his eyes wander to the back row. That spot belonged to Moses Jones, his 83-year-old uncle, who liked to drive to church in his green Chevy Malibu, arrive early and chat every body up before settling into his seat by the door. He died of the coronavirus in April.

"I can still see him there," said Mr. Jones, the pastor. "It never goes away."

There is a street corner in Plano, Texas, that was occupied

Continued on Page 8

Russia Fears But Can't Quit Open Internet

By ANTON TROIANOVSKI

MOSCOW — Margarita Simonyan, the editor in chief of the Kremlin-controlled RT television network, recently called on the government to block access to Western social media.

She wrote: "Foreign platforms in Russia must be shut down."

Her choice of social network for sending that message: Twitter.

While the Kremlin fears an open internet shaped by American companies, it just can't quit it.

Russia's winter of discontent, waves of nationwide protests set off by the return of the opposition leader Aleksandr Navalny, has been enabled by the country's free and open internet. The state controls the television airwaves, but online Mr. Navalny's dramatic arrest upon arrival in Moscow, his investigation into President Vladimir Putin's purported secret palace and his supporters' calls for protest were all broadcast to an audience of many millions.

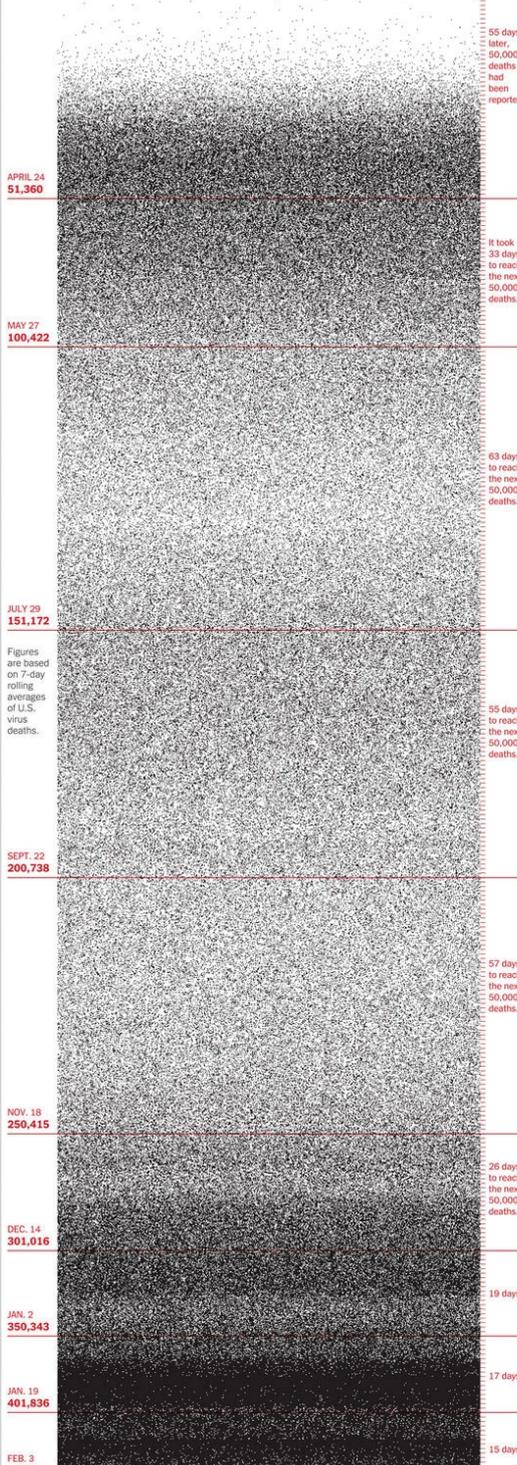
For years, the Russian government has been putting in place the technological and legal infrastructure to clamp down on freedom of speech online, leading to frequent predictions that the country could be heading toward internet censorship akin to China's great firewall.

But even as Mr. Putin faced the biggest protests in years last month, his government appeared

The Toll: America Approaches Half a Million Covid Deaths

Feb. 29, 2020, first report of a U.S. death, in Washington State

Each dot represents one death from Covid-19 in the U.S.



Garland Faces Resurgent Peril Of Extremism

Oklahoma City Attack Shaped His Views

By MARK LEIBOVICH

WASHINGTON — Judge Merrick B. Garland always made a point of wearing a coat and tie when he surveyed the wreckage at the site of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, the worst domestic terrorist attack in American history.

He had been dispatched from Washington to oversee the case for the Justice Department, and he told colleagues that he viewed his daily uniform as a gesture of respect for a community left devastated after Timothy J. McVeigh placed a 7,000-pound bomb in a Ryder truck and blew up the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, killing 168 people, including 19 children.

"It really looked like a war zone," Judge Garland said in recalling the destroyed and still-smoldering building, part of an oral history he participated in for the Oklahoma City National Memorial and Museum. "The site was lit up like a sun, like the middle of the day." The worst part, he said, was seeing the demolished day care center. "There was nothing there," he said. "It was just a big empty concave." His own daughters were 4 and 2 at the time.

The Oklahoma City case, he later said, was "the most important thing I have ever done in my life." When President Biden nominated Judge Garland last month to be attorney general, the news coursed up his ordeal in 2015 as President Barack Obama's thwarted nominee to the Supreme Court. But Judge Garland's experience prosecuting domestic terrorism cases in the 1990s was the formative work of his career, from the nuances of federal statutes down to the feeling of broken glass crunching beneath his dress shoes.

The man has now met the moment. At his Senate confirmation hearings starting on Monday, he will almost certainly be asked about the Department of Homeland Security's warning that the United States faces a growing threat from "violent domestic ex-

Continued on Page 26

STORMS EXPOSING A NATION PRIMED FOR CATASTROPHE

CLIMATE CHANGE WRATH

Unprepared for Threats Facing Power Grids, Water and Roads

This article is by Christopher Flavelle, Brad Plumer and Hiroko Tabuchi.

Even as Texas struggled to restore electricity and water over the past week, signs of the risks posed by increasingly extreme weather to set off a domino effect of breakdowns were cropping up across the country.

The continent-spanning winter storms triggered blackouts in Texas, Oklahoma, Mississippi and several other states. One-third of oil production in the nation was halted. Drinking-water systems in Ohio were knocked offline. Road networks nationwide were paralyzed and vaccination efforts in 20 states were disrupted.

The crisis carries a profound warning. As climate change brings more frequent and intense storms, floods, heat waves, wildfires and other extreme events, it is placing growing stress on the foundations of the country's economy: Its network of roads and railways, drinking-water systems, power plants, electrical grids, industrial waste sites and even homes. Failures in just one sector can set off a domino effect of breakdowns in hard-to-predict ways.

Much of this infrastructure was built decades ago, under the expectation that the environment around it would remain stable, or at least fluctuate within predictable bounds. Now climate change is upending that assumption.

"We are colliding with a future of extremes," said Alice Hill, who oversees planning for climate risks on the National Security Council during the Obama administration. "We base all our choices

Continued on Page 22

A \$16.752 BILL Texans have reported soaring electric fees during a winter storm. PAGE 24



Johanna Guzmán with two of her six children in northern Venezuela, where contraceptives are difficult to find, let alone afford.

Lack of Birth Control Deepens Women's Burden in Venezuela

By JULIE TURKEWITZ and ISAYEN HERRERA

SAN DIEGO DE LOS ALTOS, Venezuela — The moment Johanna Guzmán, 25, discovered she was going to have her sixth child she began to sob, crushed by the idea of bringing another life into a nation in such decay.

For years, as Venezuela spiraled deeper into an economic crisis, she and her husband had scoured clinics and pharmacies for any kind of birth control, usually in vain. They had a third child. A fourth. A fifth.

Already, Ms. Guzmán was cooking meager dinners over a wood

year of economic crisis, a deeply personal drama is playing out inside the home: Millions of women are no longer able to find or afford birth control, pushing many into unplanned pregnancies at a time when they can barely feed the children they already have.

Around Caracas, the capital, a pack of three condoms costs \$4.40 — three times Venezuela's monthly minimum wage of \$1.50. Birth control pills cost more than twice as much, roughly \$11 a month, while an IUD or intrauterine device, can cost more than \$40

Feb 21st, 2021 Front cover of the New York Times showed a "Wall of Grief"

68, Los Angeles **Cancer survivor born in the Philippines.** • William Hrabnicky, 76, Cleveland • Ann Stokes-Smith, 87, Charleston, S.C. • Fred Walter Gray, 75, Benton County, Wash. • Carl Redd, 76, **Jazz pianist, composer and educator.** • Donald J. Horsfall, 72, Rydal, Pa. • Larry Rathgeb, 72, Burne, Vt. • Carole Brookins, 76, Palm Beach, Fla. • Laneeka Barksdale, 47, Detroit • Floyd Cardoz, 72, New York City **Saved 56 Jewish families from the Gestapo.** • Peggy Rakestraw, 72, Mattheis, Louisiana • Landon Spradlin, 66, Concord, N.C. • Mary Virginia McKeon, 65, Chicago • Roger Lehmann, 68, Roselle, Ill. **Grandmother who was always full of ideas.** • Susan McPherson, 72, New York City • Noel Sinkiat, 64, Olney, Md. • Minette Goff Cooper, 79, Louisiana • Thomas A. Real, 61, Northbrook, Ill. • Offiong, 25, Michigan • April Dunn, 33, Baton Rouge, La. **Advocate for disability rights.** • Hunter Sakas, 67, Northbrook, Ill. • Mary Roman, 84, Norwalk, Conn. • Janice Preschel, 60, Teaneck, N.J. • 89, Washington **Pilot still teaching people to fly at 88.** • Ralph Plaisance, 87, Massachusetts • 87, Plymouth, Mich. • Ronnie Estes, 73, Stevensville, Md. • Ronald Burdette Culp, 84, Redding, California • 22, Broken Arrow, Okla. • Leo Sreebny, 98, Seattle **Preferred bolo ties to neckties, suspended**

On May 24, 2020 the New York Times' front cover and inner pages featured 1000 out of the 100,000 US deaths

Dashboards for the masses

It took years for news agencies to hesitantly adopt data journalism and visualisation. In 2020, we ignored all questions of data literacy and turned every news site into a public dashboard. Positive tests, Covid deaths, hospitalisation stats and recovery numbers, followed by charts for [tax collection](#), [unemployment rates](#), [domestic violence](#), [suicides](#)... Vaccinations have now become the most recent key performance indicator, with percentage charts added for both first and second shots.

It seems like almost overnight the term 'data journalism' essentially evaporated. With a pandemic that can only be properly grasped through numbers and charts, all journalism became data-driven. Now our heightened focus on public health should also inform a heightened sensitivity towards data visualisation and its contribution to the health of our public discourse.

Responsible Open Source Investigations for Human Rights Research

Author: **Gabriela Ivens**

When so much is possible, drawing a line between can and should becomes essential

When I started working with open source information I knew it under different names – ‘citizen evidence’, ‘publicly available data’ or ‘user-generated content’. But regardless of what it was called, I was drawn to the idea that some of the same techniques and data sources used by companies and governments to collect information on individuals could be flipped around to expose abuses of power. In theory, all that was needed was an internet connection, some tools and a creative mindset.

Working on a project called [Exposing the Invisible](#), we highlighted different approaches, technologies and projects that either made use of public data or highlighted ways, both digital and physical, to create data using low-cost and accessible means. I learned about projects that used cameras attached to kites [to capture higher resolution imagery of towns where none had existed before](#), investigations that used flight spotting and tracking websites to [track planes being used to clandestinely deport people](#), and techniques to analyse websites in order to link particular companies.

At the same time as researchers and tool developers were increasingly testing the boundaries of what was possible, a community was forming around questions of ethics and responsibility in this type of work. The 2016 collaboratively-written [DatNav](#) report, for example, featured guidance on navigating some of the important ethical dilemmas of the time, and in 2017 a [Responsible Data Forum](#) gathered others interested in these questions.

Nowadays, open source data is used in a range of ways, and in different types of investigation. One of the most well-known of these involves researchers [investigating crisis and conflict situations from afar](#), predominantly through visual data. By knowing how to analyse videos and photographs shared online alongside satellite imagery, researchers are able to determine exact locations, dates and impacts of particular violations.

The benefits of being able to gain this kind of knowledge are clear, but these new and increasingly widespread capabilities also give rise to significant concerns around issues like what is being covered, what stories and data are being missed, how to gain meaningful consent to publish findings and re-publish content, what to do if consent is not possible (without it, how can you know you aren't retraumatising those captured in, or those who captured, a video?), who is credited in the investigative process, and who has and does not have access to the investigative techniques, data and tools being used.

In a chapter I wrote with Zara Rahman for the book [Digital Witness](#), titled *Ethics in Open Source Investigations*, we explored questions around who is able to do these kinds of investigations and who is getting credit for them, and looked at different elements of harm. Like many others, we don't believe it's possible to always 'do no harm' (a framework often applied to human rights research) with this type of fast-moving work in an ever-changing landscape, especially when the work involves making decisions for others from afar – but we do need to put extra work into reducing the harm that can be caused.

This applies both to those who have captured evidence or who appear in evidence, and to those working on investigations. In work I've done in the past that focused on videos and photographs of human rights violations, I sought out and developed individual strategies to reduce and manage the risk of vicarious traumatisation when viewing distressing content, learning from others in this space such as the [Eyewitness Media Hub](#), Sam Dubberley and Amnesty International's [Digital Verification Corps](#), who have built this out in their programmes.

I've learnt that while individual strategies are useful, they can only go so far. For those working in organisations, there needs to be an organisational commitment to, and a system-wide approach toward, enabling people to work sustainably with this kind of material. This is the path we're taking at Human Rights Watch as part of the work of our internal Stress and Resilience Task Force, through devising an organisational approach to safeguarding the wellbeing of our staff and those we work with when working with distressing material.

While collaborating with the Syrian-led NGO [Mnemonic](#) on their [Syrian Archive](#) project, I learned the importance of having contextual knowledge of both the context and of those who have been doing the work of capturing videos and photographs. The Syrian Archive's founder, Hadi Al Khatib, often spoke about how essential it was to do open source work in collaboration

with those who were working in Syria, and, when possible, those who recorded the videos the organisation was working with.

Documenting human rights violations generally works best, in my experience, when you combine as many different types of data as possible with knowledge of the place and context in which you are working. When it comes to using and publishing open source data, I find that focusing on the source – whether that be the person represented in the dataset you have, the person behind or in front of the camera, the whistleblower, or the person represented in a data leak – can help to guide decisions.

Looking forward

In a field that relies on technology and publicly available data, what it means to conduct responsible open source investigations is constantly changing. Undoubtedly, I will look back in six years' time and the types of data available, the ways in which data could be used, and the norms around using that data will have evolved. With thought, care, and clear standards, this evolution can happen in a rights-respecting way.

Right now, taking a human rights based approach helps to guide me through these difficult questions using human rights principles such as proportionality and necessity, alongside other related approaches such as duty of care, harm minimisation, and radical empathy (for more on how this can be applied in open source investigations, see an article I wrote with Sophie Dyer: [What would a feminist open source investigation look like?](#)). In working on these questions with Zara Rahman, we used the maxim 'the ends can not justify the means' as a touchstone to help guide the use of these techniques in human rights research.

Some people currently see open source investigations as somewhat magical. This can lead to putting the practice on a pedestal, or believing it lies out of reach – that a person couldn't do these kinds of investigations themselves. But these techniques should not be seen as magic – they should be reviewed, questioned, and replicated.

Due to restrictions in movement over the past year, much human rights research has of necessity moved online, leading researchers to further develop their skills in working with open sources of data. My hope is for these techniques to become more normalised and less sensationalised, and that they will become part of a researcher's standard toolbox, ready if and when needed.

The reason I started in this area of work is the same reason I continue – in the hopes that these techniques will be accessible to as wide a group of people as possible, in order to continue to expose human rights abuses.

Further reading

- Libby McAvoy, [Centering the Source in Open Source Investigation](#)
- Sam Dubberley, Elizabeth Griffin Haluk Mert Bal , Eyewitness Media Hub, [Making Secondary Trauma a Primary Issue: A Study of Eyewitness Media and Vicarious Trauma on the Digital Frontline.](#)
- Sophie Dyer and Gabriela Ivens, [What would a feminist open source investigation look like?](#)
- Yvonne McDermott, Daragh Murray and Alexa Koenig, [Digital Accountability Symposium: Whose Stories Get Told, and by Whom? Representativeness in Open Source Human Rights Investigations](#)
- Zara Rahman and Gabriela Ivens, Ethics in Open Source Investigations, [Digital Witness: Using Open Source Information for Human Rights Investigation, Documentation, and Accountability](#)

Open Data Meets Responsible Data for a More Sustainable Future

Author: [TEDIC](#)

Over the past decade, hype around access to public information has moved on to serious discussions around what it means to collect, store and disseminate data, and the responsibilities of public and private data holders.

In 2011, discussions within the [recently founded](#) Open Government Partnership (OGP) boosted a novel collaboration between civil society and public agencies worldwide. The aim of these discussions was to jointly determine best practices and methodologies for making public information available through open databases, and initiatives hosted by civil society emerged to strengthen the process shortly after.

In Latin America, [Abrelatam and Condatos](#) are the most well-known of these initiatives, and they have played a vital role in building connections between governments, citizens, and CSOs interested in open data for research, advocacy and policy making, [engendering high levels of interaction and trust between these stakeholders](#).

As Paraguay's main digital rights organisation, [TEDIC](#) has participated in discussions around open data on both the country and regional level since the organisation's inception. However, after ten years of openness policies, reflections and lessons learned must inform appropriate evolution and adaptation and ensure that future open data policies adopt a more [responsible data approach](#) on the part of both civil society organisations (CSOs) and governments.

Here, we offer some reflections based on years of engaging with these issues.

Building databases is not enough

At the start of this movement, building databases, apps and websites appeared to be a goal in itself. Since then, we have observed an increase in understanding that it is not enough to just create a database and expect that people will use it. Although ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) have enormously facilitated access to information in general,

governments and CSOs must understand that there [are inequalities in the region that need proper attention](#), and both must work to ensure proper access to publicly available information. Structural problems such as internet access and data literacy should be taken into account by policymakers, in order to find appropriate ways to disseminate information and engage with citizens.

More collaboration between governments and CSOs

We need robust partnerships between government and CSOs. TEDIC has documented collaborations with the government that aimed to create civic technology based on public information and databases but that [ultimately failed due to public bodies' restrictions](#) that made effective reuse by third parties difficult violating open data OGP agreements.

In order to build a society that truly values transparency, we need robust relationships between governments and civil society organisations that ensure that effective reuse of data by different stakeholders is possible.

Diversity should be incorporated by design

When CSOs and governments design open data policies, there is a [lack of representation](#) from LGBTQI communities and grassroots women's communities. This underrepresentation is a serious problem that threatens the generation of databases that might systematise these groups' particular issues and needs. It could arguably continue to make them invisible to both public and private initiatives that could improve their lives.

We need better privacy and data protection regulation

The initial trend of aiming to open up as much information as possible has evolved into a more precautionary approach that also considers the protection of privacy and personal data. The recent enactment of the GDPR in the European Union has now forced civil society and even governments to recognise the importance of responsible data management, and [incorporate responsible data practices in their organizational strategies](#).

This is important, and we are noticing how different countries in Latin America are now moving towards enacting data protection laws and provisions as well. In Paraguay, for example, TEDIC is part of a national coalition that [has recently presented a comprehensive data protection law](#) in Congress, with the endorsement of a number of public and private stakeholders.

The future: going beyond data

The tectonic shift brought about by transparency and open data policies in Paraguay and in the region is undeniable. However, such initiatives need to incorporate provisions to mitigate the potentially harmful effects associated with creating databases that hold identifiable and sensitive information. We believe that government open data action plans and CSO projects that collect, reuse or store data should, at a minimum, conduct a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) for any project related to the creation of any database. Such DPIAs should be available to the public.

We also need to go beyond focusing only on databases, apps and websites that store and visualise information. While important, this needs to be part of a broader debate around ensuring connectivity, accessibility and digital literacy. We consider spaces like Abrelatam/Condatos to be vital in tackling these structural problems. In the long run, inequalities in these areas could risk creating first- and second-class citizens, depending on the amount of information and data that people can access and process. We must avoid this at all costs.

Lastly, we believe that there needs to be a more concerted effort to systematise experiences and lessons learned over the last ten years. The experiences of both CSOs and governments could provide insight into both the policies and initiatives that have worked, and those that have not. Building an accessible knowledge infrastructure could help strengthen the current community of practitioners, who aim to create a more responsible data ecosystem that respects peoples and communities' right to consent, privacy and data ownership, while also ensuring the transparency, openness and reuse of data our societies need for a healthy democracy. Such is the challenge in the years to come.

Responsible Data

The logo consists of a white square outline centered on the red background. Inside the square, the letters 'RD' are written in a bold, white, sans-serif font.

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