

IS DATA GOOD FOR DEMOCRACY?

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*"The historian without his facts is rootless and futile; the facts without their historian are dead and meaningless." - E. H. Carr, 'What is History?'*¹

Data, in the philosophical sense of the word, consists of 'things known or assumed as facts, making the basis of reasoning or calculation'². Hence, just like the 'facts' E. H. Carr refers to in his book '*What is History?*', data can be used to aid the credibility and formation of arguments, though without context - in the case of data this would most often be provided by statistical models - it lacks the meaning to impact our democracies.

However, having gone through the processing required to give context, data loses its objectivity. This can open up a dangerous space where the perception that data is somehow closer to the 'truth', due to its factual origins, contradicts with reality; indeed data just becomes another tool to use in political rhetoric and decision-making. Though this perception is slowly shifting - not least of all due to the media attention of what has recently been dubbed 'alternative facts' - the heart of the debate on whether data is truly making a 'good' contribution to democratic states lies not in the objectivity of data, but in who has access to harness data in an influential and meaningful context. Principally, democracy is a two-way street. Governments and elected representatives have the mandate to drive policies, but citizens equally have the right to be suitably informed to choose leaders wisely, and hold them to account to safeguard from political exploitation. This essay aims to examine if the power to give narrative to data, and consequently credit opinion and influence decision-making, is skewed in favour of one of these two parties: democratically-elected leaders or the citizens they account to. And if it is a minority at the top of this system who have a monopoly on the use of data: does this undermine democracy? Will the balance of scales ever change? What can we do to safeguard from abuse, and ultimately *make* data good for democracy?

The digital explosion surrounding open data has empowered individuals to put democracy into action. This action can be seen to have taken three forms; detecting governmental malpractice, educating electorate about their government, and increasing citizen engagement in the running of democracies at a national level. To see the effect of the first form of action, you only need to remember so far as Heather Brook's 2009 Freedom of Information Act request on MP expense reports³. The ensuing scandal led to the first forced resignation of the Speaker of the House in three centuries and a legacy on the power of public scrutiny. Moreover, governmental malpractice does not only take the form of corruption, as Ben Wellington's use of New York's open data demonstrated when he caught a multi-million-dollar budgeting error⁴. The isolated efforts of both these individuals were greatly revealing, but the advancements in Internet and mobile applications mean any citizen can do their part to monitor representatives, track manifesto promises, and make more informed votes by

¹ Carr, E. H. (1990). *What is History?*. 2nd edition. St Ives, England: Penguin Books, p.30.

² En.oxforddictionaries.com. *Definition of democracy in English*. [online] Available at: <http://bit.ly/2eTWWVh> [Accessed 18 Feb. 2017].

³ Ted.com, (2012). *Heather Brooke / Speaker*. [online] Available at: <http://bit.ly/2miGUpp> [Accessed: 13 Feb. 2017].

⁴ Eng, K. (2016). *How government data creates smarter, more connected societies*. [online] ideas.ted.com. Available at: <http://bit.ly/2b5ccuN> [Accessed 13 Feb. 2017].

F.M.

comparing their beliefs against those of candidates before an election. The website TheyWorkForYou⁵ publishes a searchable and shareable Hansard, as well as numerology on matters such as debates attended and questions asked by MPs. Though the latter feature was heavily criticized by MP Peter Luff as a “crude indicator of effectiveness”⁶, the website extensively warns its users against the dangers of taking numerical data at face value and persuades them to read into MPs’ participation⁷. Therefore, it could be argued the risk of misinterpretation is nominal, and by no means worth denying access to such a wealth of opportunity to educate and inform - indeed I would not have found Luff’s statements if it were not for the website in question. What is of more concern, is the MP’s claim that it has instigated “an arms race in which what can be measured will always count for more than intelligent analysis of what can be achieved”⁸. Undeniably there have been instances of MPs misusing their right to engage in debates simply to increase their public ranking⁹. The solution to this is less straightforward, and if such practice goes unaccounted, democracy will suffer from a new form of abuse. The examples mentioned thus far illustrate how data aids citizens to come from a position of knowledge, by which they have the power to get things changed, and ensure they are being represented. But data is not just to be read and understood by the electorate - rather, it can be created by them. During the 2013 Kenyan elections, users of the app Ushahidi could upload real-time data and report any incidences of election tampering¹⁰. Now, this app is being used to support democracy across the world. Likewise, citizen participation can extend beyond election time through apps such as DemocracyOS. The Argentinian government used this platform to hold a two-way conversation about three pieces of legislation, two concerning urban transport and one on the use of public space¹¹. Understanding open data, along with these platforms allowing direct engagement with policy-makers, widens the potential for governments to make better informed, data-driven decisions. It provides residents’ opinions more validity, where their thoughts on improving services can be seriously considered, unlike the often criticized ‘tick box’ consultation exercises of the past.

The above success stories demonstrate the potential of data to influence democracies from the bottom-up, yet, there is still much to be done to alleviate the limitations that cap this progress. The process of writing history begins with selecting your facts. In much the same way, the selection of which data to open for public usage begins the process of how much influence the citizen-voice can hold. Suppressing information, as Ben

⁵ Somersethouseorg.uk, (2016). *How do you use data for the common good?*. [online] Available at: <http://bit.ly/2mdmxNY> [Accessed 13 Feb. 2017].

⁶ Theyworkforyou.com, (2006). *28 Jun 2006 House of Commons debates*. [online] Available at: <http://bit.ly/2I5FEEh> [Accessed 23 Feb. 2017].

⁷ Theyworkforyou.com, (2006). *Frequently asked questions*. [online] Available at: <http://bit.ly/2I5z7t6> [Accessed 23 Feb. 2017].

⁸ Theyworkforyou.com, (2006). *28 Jun 2006 House of Commons debates*. [online] Available at: <http://bit.ly/2I5FEEh> [Accessed 23 Feb. 2017].

⁹ Hurst, G. (2006). *The MPs who can’t stop talking*. [online] Times Online. Available at: <http://bit.ly/2mit326> [Accessed 23 Feb. 2017].

¹⁰ Ross, E. (2016). *Apps for democracy - open data and the future of politics*. [online] The Guardian. Available at: <http://bit.ly/2btnZoX> [Accessed 13 Feb. 2017]

¹¹ Demsoc.org, (2016). *How can open data help democracy? - The Democratic Society*. [online] Available at: <http://bit.ly/2lxgzVU> [Accessed 16 Feb. 2017]

F.M.

Goldcare discovered, is one of the biggest ethical problems facing our democracies today. “If I tossed a coin a hundred times, and I’m allowed to withhold from you the answers half the times, then I can convince you that I have a coin with two heads.”¹²; Goldcare’s ominous message is exemplified incessantly in the medical field. Tamiflu, a drug promising to reduce complications of influenza, was stockpiled by governments around the world for billions of tax-payer dollars. In practicality, it simply shortened the infection by a few hours. Such a damning economic assessment slipped by our countries’ decision-makers because it was made in the absence of all the trial data. When organisations like the Cochrane Group have tried to review such trials in the past, companies and the European Medicines Agency denied them access to the full and relevant data.

Organisations and citizens alike can only use data to influence democracies from the bottom-up when given access to the whole picture. To withhold this right from them is equivalent to an undemocratic dictatorship, as people are denied the power to hold their governments to account. Conversely, issues also exist around making more data open. There is the threat that too much data, released in difficult-to-process formats, will bury the stories that matter in plain sight, as larger volumes of data are more difficult to comprehend without the use of statistical models. With this thought, we come to the two major factors that stem the divide between citizens, and the ‘analyst class’: monopoly of data access, and the ability to process it.

When it comes to efficiently and effectively manipulating data to endorse political opinions and influence policies, the average citizen is by far outclassed by the political elite, their parties, and their major donors. The aforementioned barriers of data access and processing does little to hinder those in power; the funds and tools to collate volumes of data, code algorithms, and spawn analyses that power our democracies is far more accessible to this minority. Donald Trump’s recent election campaign, and subsequent victory, provides the perfect case study to demonstrate the most recent advancements in data-driven technology available to those in government. Alexander Nix, CEO of Cambridge Analytica, made no attempts to hide the company’s “approach to data communication... [playing] an integral part in President-elect Trump’s extraordinary win”¹³. He also claims Cambridge Analytica applied psychometrics to “profile the personality of every adult in the United States of America - 220 million people”. By using data points and analysing citizens’ digital footprints, the company applies the OCEAN model to measure individuals’ personality. From this, they can micro-target political marketing to play on people’s fears, needs, interests and so on. The marketing comes through in at least two known forms: sponsored news-feed-style adverts in Facebook timelines, and through Groundgame, an app for election canvassing that combines the processed data with mapping technology so canvassers know exactly how to approach a voter before knocking on their door. At this stage, there is still an argument that despite the imbalance of power to harness data that separates the governmental elite from the citizens under them, this use of data is not inherently ‘bad’ for democracy. Cambridge Analytica were not impeaching on voters free will. Politics has somewhat always been the art of persuasion, and all Cambridge Analytica was doing was targeting its clientele’s messages more efficiently, rather than resort to the blanket advertising of

¹² Ted.com, (2011). *Ben Goldcare / Speaker*. [online] Available at: <http://bit.ly/2fl6tH> [Accessed: 16 Feb. 2017]

¹³ Gassegger, H. and Krogerus, M. (2017). *The Data That Turned the World Upside Down*. [online] Motherboard. Available at: <http://bit.ly/2jWWHL0> [Accessed 16 Feb. 2017]

F.M.

the past. These same voters have always been vulnerable to messages playing on personal anxieties and interests. And as time goes on, as with all new technology, psychometric tools will likely become better distributed allowing everyone to catch up to the age of the algorithm, so that targeted adverts will just become another platform for political traction. However, this argument only holds whilst those in power do not maintain a monopoly on analytics nor abuse their outreach. The latter complication has already presented itself, if Cambridge Analytica truly did as sources claim, and took part in actions that would keep potential opposition voters away from the ballot box. Certain demographics such as African Americans, who had also been identified as anti-republican, had videos targeted on their Facebook timeline that showed Hilary Clinton referring to black men as predators. This attempt to suppress votes is abhorrently undemocratic, and cannot coexist in a state which values and respects the citizen-voice above all else.

Cambridge Analytica clearly demonstrates the radical divide between the abilities of the electorate on the one side, and their representatives on the other, to harness data. Perhaps more crucially, however, is the second trepidation raised by the mere existence of the specialist, data-driven software they apply. Until recently, the design of the internet has inherently been biased to decentralisation of power and the freedom of action. Though, Yochai Benkler of Harvard University is concerned data and analytics may jeopardise this redistribution, bringing back centralisation where “the accumulation of power [is held] by a relatively small set of influential state and non-state actors”¹⁴. This chilling sentiment is shared amongst intellectuals; Yuval Noah Harari describes a near future where humans will place all faith in data and the algorithm. At a time when Facebook and Google will know our political preferences better than we do ourselves, “institutions like democratic elections and free markets will be as obsolete and flint knives and rain dances”¹⁵. Unsurprisingly, these concerns trace back to the assumption that the analyst-class divide will only continue to grow from here.

In conclusion, at present the scope to use data to influence actions is more prominent and sophisticated from the top-down - political elites to citizens - than the bottom-up - citizens to their leaders. Whilst populaces can do their best to keep governments in check, educate themselves to possess better informed opinions, and engage in policy-making, there is a clear difference between their impact, and the impact of a political minority who wield data without the limitations of access or understanding. Though many believe this imbalance of power over data-usage will only grow, whilst this inequality persists, data cannot be good for our democratic societies which are built on the equality of its citizens and its leaders.

¹⁴ The Economist, (2016). *Living with technology: The data republic*. [online] Available at: <http://econ.st/1pIAfpo> [Accessed 16 Feb. 2017]

¹⁵ Intelligencesquared.com, (2016). *Yuval Noah Harari on the Rise of Homo Deus*. [online] Available at: <http://bit.ly/2awVIzz> [Accessed 13 Feb. 2017]

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