

STRATEGY

2022-2024

**DATA&
SOCIETY**

Data & Society is an independent, nonprofit research institute that works to illuminate how data-centric technologies and automation affect the world around us. We use interdisciplinary research and engagement to advance public understanding of the social and cultural implications of technology.

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What we believe

Since our founding in 2013, the conviction at the core of our work has never wavered: the challenges we face in ethically governing data-centric technologies and automation cannot be solved with technical fixes that leave structural social problems unaddressed, nor can they be adequately addressed by action from the private sector. Addressing them requires looking beyond the technologies themselves to focus on the social contexts in which they are designed, deployed, and governed — to the ways they are shaped by people and societies. And it requires looking closely at power. Our research is about making visible the underlying values that drive systems — and in turn, the decisions that inform them — and pushing for them to be chosen deliberately, and with respect for human dignity.

Across our field, in a growing and connected group of organizations and coalitions, there is deep work underway to define our most urgent issues, and to respond to them in ways that build toward systems of real accountability and justice. Because of the amassing strength of this field as a whole, and because of increasing societal and government concern about the role of data-centric technologies, this is a critical moment of opportunity to shape our future together, through work with a growing, international network. Our strategy is designed to ensure that our work meets this moment with care, rigor, and resolve.

Vision

We envision a future where the values that inform data-centric technologies are grounded in equity and human dignity. A future in which technological progress is not seen as inevitable nor as a cure-all, but as a considered societal choice. A future where the just and equitable design, use, and governance of technology is built on a deep understanding of diverse contexts and lived realities. This strategy will guide our work in ways that help us bring that vision ever closer to reality.

Mission

At Data & Society, we advance public understanding of the social and cultural implications of data-centric technologies and automation. Through empirically grounded research and inclusive engagement, we work to ensure that knowledge guides the development and governance of technology.

The challenge

From our founding, our work has been animated by a set of core concerns:

1

Data-centric technologies have **social, cultural, and political implications** that are far-reaching, unevenly distributed, and poorly understood.

2

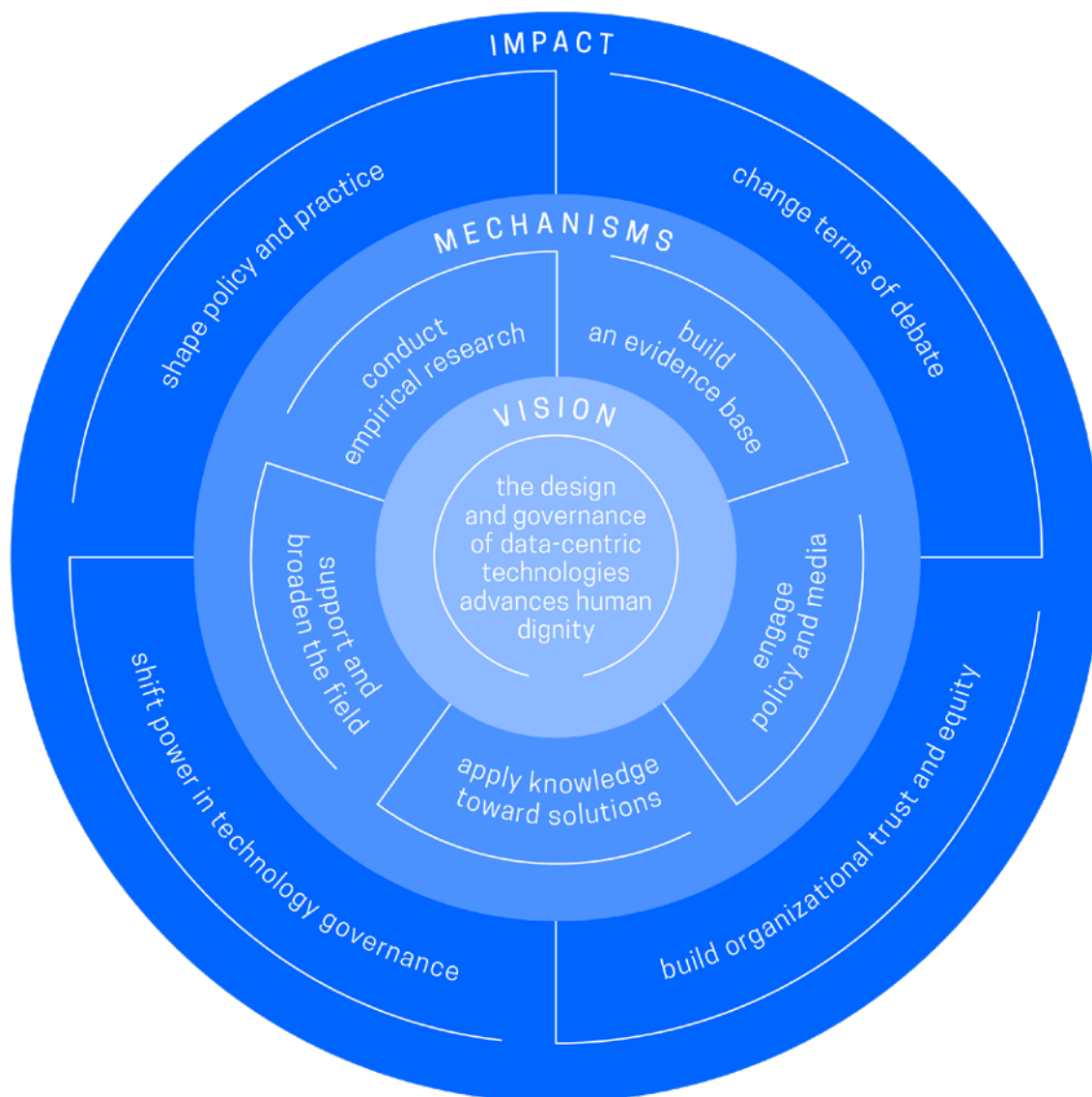
These technologies **disproportionately cause harm** to systemically marginalized populations.

3

The concentration of power and wealth in the technology industry impacts **the governance of data-centric technologies**, which has consequences for democratic rights and practice.

Theory of change

Our research seeks to challenge assumptions and shift understandings about the social and cultural implications of data-centric technologies. Empirical research is a first, crucial step to building an evidence base for just data governance that more equitably serves the public. That research must be grounded in a range of disciplines and lived expertise, and it must have the capacity to be translated across communities. It must be legible, discoverable, and compelling to our key audiences and collaborators.



Our communities

We work with a range of partners to translate and disseminate research conclusions in support of new, equitable approaches.



Scholars and researchers

to investigate urgent questions about data-centric technologies in society.



Policy experts and media

to help translate and influence the evidence-based design and governance of data-centric technologies.



Community advocates and technology designers

to facilitate collaboration, strengthen our field, and help shift power in technology governance.

Values

Independence, integrity, and equity are the foundations of rigorous empirical research, and enable creativity in our research and engagement. We value new forms of knowledge production, open experimentation, and a diversity of opinion and experience.

Partnership principles

Moving the needle on pressing issues at the intersection of technology and public life demands deep collaboration and partnership.

In our approach to network engagement and partnership development, we aim to strengthen our ties with Data & Society's existing network of advisors, affiliates, and alumni. We also seek to establish, participate in, and contribute to other policy, practice, and research networks, and to build more connections between those networks and our programmatic work — as well as to create meaningful partnerships with other organizations and academic institutions. This is a critical part of how we understand our strategy and our impact in the world, and how we challenge and diversify our own ideas and assumptions.

Collaboration

In partnership with peer organizations, we share findings, expand our impact through complementary capacities, and build coalitions on research and engagement projects.

Equity

Centering underrepresented voices from around the world, we use our research methods and convening power to unearth alternative ways of knowing and living with data-centric technologies.

Generativity

We bring together frames of discussion that respond to community needs, and seek to challenge and diversify our own ideas and assumptions.

How we work

From our earliest days, Data & Society has focused on conducting **empirical research** grounded in the social sciences, and bringing the findings to debates on the governance of algorithmic systems.

We believe that it is not possible to design just governance without a nuanced understanding of technology’s on-the-ground impacts, one that centers historically vulnerable groups.

That’s why we’ve built a team of brilliant researchers, post-doctoral scholars, and faculty fellows, and woven policy, communications, and network engagement into the mix. Our new strategy focuses on bringing our **research** and **engagement** efforts closer together around urgent priorities.

In each of our programs, our goal is to move from **building an evidence base** and diagnosing complex harms to **advancing specific solutions** and **just outcomes in policy**, in norms, and in societal expectations for the data-centric world that we are already a part of — and to do so in ways that **support and broaden a vibrant and growing field**.

Thematic priorities

Four priorities guide our work. Together, they’re intended to be narrow enough to provide us with guiding themes, complementary enough that research in one pillar can inform work in the others, and generative enough to ensure there is space for new lines of inquiry to emerge.

Power, control, and the datafied state

As governments procure, develop, implement, and mandate the use of digital and computational systems, we see the state become ever more “datafied” — and the boundaries between public and private are increasingly blurred. And while there has been close attention paid to the power of platforms, we see a need for greater focus on the role and power of states when it comes to how society encounters algorithmic decision-making systems and their impacts. Under this strategic pillar, we explore how algorithms become part of and influence state functions, how trust and doubt in public sector data infrastructures are shaped — and what the implications are for democratic practice.

Related programs

- *AI on the Ground*
 - *The Datafied State (a cross-program exploration)*
 - *Labor Futures*
 - *Policy Engagement*
 - *Public Technology Leadership Collaborative*
 - *Race, Data and the State: 2022-23 Faculty Fellows Program*
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Participation, agency, and algorithmic accountability

New regulatory approaches align on a critical and relatively new idea — that algorithmic systems should be governed in participatory ways. But too often, this has meant simply inviting affected communities into spaces of power, without challenging prevailing power dynamics. We know that participatory governance requires centering historically minoritized and vulnerable groups, and shifting power in a significant way. It requires accountability, not only for transparency’s sake, but to enable a true redress of harms. Under this priority, we seek to better understand what forms of public and community involvement can increase agency, power, and equity in data governance and algorithmic accountability, and what the trade-offs are across them.

Related programs

- *AI on the Ground*
 - *Health and Data*
 - *Labor Futures*
 - *Trustworthy Infrastructures*
 - *Network Engagement*
-

Reframing society’s relationship to technology

Technology is neither neutral nor inevitable; it reflects society’s choices. If we fail to recognize the social and political complexity that informs its development, we will replicate, exacerbate, and accelerate inequalities. We seek to reclaim a narrative — advanced largely by private interests — that drives technological innovation at all costs, and that positions technology as both the source of and the solution to urgent societal challenges, from climate change to social injustice to polarization and violence in online discourse. Our events, communications, and policy work highlights empirical findings about social context and power and puts essential voices at the center of these debates and discussions.

We work with media outlets and policy communities to center stories and tactics that reveal the contexts in which technology is designed, and highlight the power society has to change the trajectory of its development. Our interventions counter and offer alternatives to technosolutionist narratives that position technology as a cure-all for society’s greatest challenges.

Related programs

- *Media Engagement and Communications*
 - *Network Engagement*
 - *Policy Engagement*
 - *Public Technology Leadership Collaborative*
 - *Health and Data*
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Enduring commitment to equity

Recognizing that our organization and the nonprofit sector as a whole are built on historic systems of white supremacy, inequality, and exclusion, we endeavor to build a collaborative, trusted, and equitable organization. In all of our work, and at every level of the organization, our board of directors and leadership team are committed to continuously reviewing, building, and expanding a culture of belonging. Throughout the year-long process of crafting this strategy, the entire organization has also been deeply engaged in learning and reflection about equity and accountability, and the changes we need to make as a workplace, a research institute, and a contributor to the field. This is an active, iterative process, and we see it as critical to recognize this work — which involves every member of our team — as a strategic priority for the organization.

All programs contribute to this strategic priority

What success looks like

Recognizing that data reveals mostly what we value and choose to measure, we track our impact through narrative rather than through numbers. This allows us to trace our research projects from concept to engagement to impact, reflect on our outcomes across programs, and use what we learn to iterate and adapt. Our work has an impact when we are able to:

Change the terms of debate by challenging techno-solutionist narratives and pushing for nuanced, context-specific understandings of technology's role in society.

Shift power by foregrounding systemically affected communities and offering approaches to design and governance that are grounded in equity and justice.

Shape policy and practice by informing emerging data governance with a rigorous, interdisciplinary evidence base drawn from empirical research.

Build organizational trust and equity by connecting and engaging with our staff and network to nurture a culture where everyone's work is supported, celebrated, and valued.

Our role in the field

We are a 501c3 research institute with a mandate to move our research into the world. Because our impact depends in large part on our capacity to make our findings visible and meaningful outside of academia, Data & Society is structured to carry out both research and engagement work. That engagement work emerges from research areas and findings, instead of vice versa, underscoring the centrality of empirical social science research to our organizational identity.

We are not in a position to advocate for specific legislation directly, and that is not our role in the field. Rather, we partner with civil rights groups, labor organizers, patient rights groups, and others working towards specific advocacy goals when they align with our programs and are supported by our research. Our engagement efforts focus on decision-makers and those who are working to influence or inform them.

Our funders

We are tremendously grateful to the donors who share our commitment to a just and equitable future and provide vital support for Data & Society's work. A list of our current funders can be found on our [website](#), in our [annual reports](#), and in our annual [990 tax forms and financial statements](#). Data & Society has committed to a rigorous review of all prospective donors to ensure that they adhere to our values and align with our mission.

Acknowledgements

Our 2022–2024 strategy is the product of the entire team at Data & Society. Special thanks go to Alix Dunn for launching and leading the strategic planning process until our strategy team, led by Ania Calderon and Irene Chung, was in place to take over, and to our board and senior leadership team for helping us consider and reconsider our objectives.

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DIGITAL LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Data & Society began in New York City, an island in a network of hills and rivers in the Atlantic Northeast known as Lenapehoking, the ancestral land of the Lenni-Lenape people. Today, we are connected online via a vast array of servers and computer devices. In the United States, much of this infrastructure sits on stolen land acquired under the extractive logic of white settler expansion. As an organization, we recognize this history and uplift the sovereignty of Indigenous people, data, and territory. We commit to dismantling all ongoing settler-colonial practices and their material implications on our digital worlds.

Our website runs on servers located on Turtle Island.

This Digital Land Acknowledgement was created during a participatory workshop in June 2020 with Data & Society staff members led by Rigoberto Lara Guzmán and Siera Dissmore.

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