

Understanding Civic Participation and Realizing Data Justice

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To understand civic participation in the datafied society and the possibilities for social change, we must foreground social and political injustices and understand how citizens are frozen out of society and “democratic” processes in general. This requires decentering technology in our analyses and interrogating the structural imbrication of injustices in a broader social, political, and economic context, while recognizing the need to identify and address technological injustices that occur. This article illustrates how British civil society has become *less* able to play an active role in democratic processes over the past decade as digital tools have proliferated. Rather, we find a disciplining of dissenting voices and depoliticization of civil society. The article argues that it is only when we take a holistic and structural approach to data injustices situated in conditions of oppression and domination that we can reach an understanding of what data justice might become to take us beyond technical/regulatory fixes that offer no more than the tweaking and taming of capitalism to a newly imagined democratic political economy beyond capitalism.

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Civic Participation in the Datafied Society

Questions of data justice invariably center their attention on technology. They encourage us to think about how technology-enabled processes and practices enhance or restrain citizen participation and civic agency, how technical affordances of particular platforms lend themselves to citizen engagement or not, and how algorithms govern and automate decision making to the detriment of democratic principles. These concerns have become ever more vital during the global pandemic when so many have had to rely heavily on digital communications for education, work, social lives, and healthcare. With the experience of home working, quarantine, and self-isolation, we have begun to recognize the importance of our digital connections for participation (of any kind) as well as the global, national, and local inequalities that the lack of digital connection exposes. This has further revealed the paucity of and problems with the sorts of participatory engagement digital lives so often bring.

Problems of civic participation in mediated worlds have a long history, as does investment of hope in new technologies to offer up emancipatory possibilities (Curran, Fenton, & Freedman, 2016). To interrogate these approaches requires a deep contextualisation that can take account of political and

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socioeconomic factors and the material consequences of inequality alongside a conceptualization of power and powerlessness to tackle the multiple questions that arise: What does it mean to participate in society as political subjects? Who is allowed to be a citizen and who is not? What types of social and political agency are recognized as relevant or credible? And ultimately, if a healthy, functioning democracy is our end point, what sort of democracy are we aiming for (Barnett, 2017)? Each of these large and enduring problems focuses on the key issue of social change and who has the power to bring it about. Who can intervene in and influence the various types and forms of governance and control and for whose benefit? Although the focus here is directed toward the United Kingdom, this analytical framework is relevant for all other (neo)liberal democracies in the digital age.

In the United Kingdom, several reports (e.g., Baker & Taylor, 2018; Institute for Public Policy Research, 2018) identify an alienation of people from politics that is exacerbated by poverty and damaging for democracy. They reveal people in communities who are isolated (Office of National Statistics, 2018), and lonely (H. M. Government, 2018), and a public life that is increasingly hollowed out of meaningful participation (Commission on the Future of Localism [CSF], 2018). If people feel that their participation in society is, at best, minimal, then the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in highlighting and ameliorating social inequalities and political injustices is ever more important (CSF, 2018). As noted by Andy Haldane, formerly (1989–2021) the Bank of England's chief economist, CSOs are particularly vital at times of rapid social change to ensure stability and prevent segregation (Haldane, 2019). Yet it is imperative to understand how CSOs own activities are subject to instability, inequality, and segregation in the digital age, if we are to understand how society can respond adequately to social and political needs.

Research has shown that the ability of British civil society to play an active role in democratic processes has been significantly reduced over the past decade. The reports produced by the Panel on the Independence of the Voluntary Sector, 2013–2016, found that its independence of voice had declined each year that they reported (Independence Panel, 2015). The UN special rapporteur described "the closing space for civil society" in the United Kingdom (Kiai, 2017, p. 18), mirroring growing attacks on freedom of assembly and expression internationally (Charities Aid Foundation, 2017). This article draws on research undertaken by the author for the Civil Society Futures inquiry (CSF, 2018), which ran from 2016 to 2018, with a follow-up study ("Policing the Political in UK Civil Society") funded by the British Academy 2019–2022, and additional research on reimagining public media funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust.¹ This

¹ Civil Society Futures was a two-year independent inquiry funded by eight major foundations and conducted by a consortium made up of Forum for the Future, Goldsmiths University of London, Citizens UK, and openDemocracy. Focusing on nine local areas around England, it looked at the current landscape and future prospects of civil society within a broad methodology of participatory action research. The follow-on British Academy-funded project involved archival desk research summarizing the existing literature on restrictions on political activity and collating and analyzing documents produced by the main regulatory and funding bodies. Alongside this, interviews were conducted with 12 small CSOs involved in a range of work that pertains to "political" activity, covering areas including disability, race and ethnicity, sexuality, gender, religion, climate change, the environment, and poverty. A further project funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust (JRCT) undertook online "townhall" discussions with members of the public across a range of issues and locations engaging over 30,000 people and leading to A Manifesto for a People's Media (Media

research highlights the need to look at civil society from both an empirical perspective—what is happening to, and in, civil society today, and where this trajectory might be leading—as well as from a normative one, linked to questions of power and social justice, and what civil society needs to do to create futures which reflect this. It situates research on civic participation and data justice in a complex contextual interplay of social, political, economic, and technological imbrications—arguing that we cannot understand one without the others. Decisions relating to datafication and data metrics emerge from our dominant social order and institutional conditions as well as contribute to both. Issues concerning data justice relate directly to our capacities for individual and collective communication and cooperation (Young, 2014), and are enmeshed with issues concerning socioeconomic justice that further demarcate them.

This requires a critique that can account for key structural and infrastructural concerns that delimit and constrain what people can and cannot do. This is not just a question of who is able to exercise individual autonomy in the digital age but extends to the very possibility for social change: the forms of deliberation available to us, mutual recognition of personhood, and the social fabric of trust: the actual conditions for a democratic *politics*. If our objective is to assess the actual conditions for politics in which technology plays a key role, then we must begin with how recent structural developments concerning neoliberal economics, state and corporate power, and political engagement have affected our *broader communications environment* before we can identify the ways in which media and communications themselves play a role in the radical critique of neoliberal democratic frames and the regeneration of democracy done differently.

Structural and Infrastructural Exclusions

If we want to answer the question of how we can better intervene in society and who has the power to bring about social change, then we have to first answer the question of why certain citizens and forms of civil society are largely excluded. Some of these concerns, such as enduring levels of economic inequality, can be considered meta-analytical issues that recur in social, economic, political, and technological domains and are likely to be relevant in all (neo)liberal democracies, although they will differ in detail in each. Others are deemed to be more infrastructural forms of exclusion that support the (non)participatory apparatuses of particular states/jurisdictions such as legal frameworks of constraint and repression. Both underpin forms of civic participation and are interwoven with data and communicative practices. Hence, my argument here is that, rather than be seen as distinct from digital concerns, such meta and infrastructural exclusions must be front and center of any project that is concerned with what data justice might become.

Inequality and Participatory Exclusions

As numerous studies have evidenced, inequality makes certain political subjects less visible and excludes others altogether. Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) show how inequality damages our societies, our economies, and our democratic systems. Inequality is a form of political evacuation: it pushes people out of the possibilities of political participation. Since the 2008 financial crash, the wealth of the richest 1% in the world has grown at an average of 6% per year compared to 3% for the rest. If this rate continues, the

Reform Coalition, 2021). The author was the principal investigator for each project, and Dr. Deborah Grayson was the lead researcher for the British Academy and JRCT project.

world's richest 1% will own two-thirds of the world's wealth by 2030 (House of Commons Library, 2018). This increase was exacerbated during the Covid pandemic, with 2020 marking the steepest increase in global billionaires' share of wealth on record. Stiglitz (2013) shows how political and economic forces have combined in the interest "of the one per cent, for the one per cent by the one per cent" (p. xxxix). The World Inequality Lab, building on the work of more than 100 researchers around the world, shows the richest 10% of the global population currently hold 76% of global wealth compared to a 2% share for the poorest half (Chancel, Picketty, Saez, & Zucman, 2022). Since wealth is a major source of future economic gains, and of power and influence, this signals further increases in inequality to come. At the heart of this explosion is the extreme concentration of economic power in the hands of a very small minority of the super-rich. The top 1% is growing much faster than the rest: between 1995 and 2021, the top 1% captured 38% of the global increment in wealth. The share of wealth owned by the global top 0.1% rose from 7% to 11% over that period as global billionaire wealth soared (Chancel et al., 2022).

In the United Kingdom, the Institute for Public Policy Research commission on economic justice revealed how the financial health of the United Kingdom is brutally divided along lines of income, geography, gender, ethnicity, and age. It ranks the United Kingdom as the fifth most unequal country in Europe (Institute for Public Policy Research, 2018). Several reports focused on the United Kingdom (e.g., Baker & Taylor, 2018; Institute for Public Policy Research, 2018) note that inequality and poverty result in less civic participation and are damaging for democracy. The Royal Society of Arts observed, "[t]he need for change; the need to seek the voice of marginalised and disadvantaged people in decision-making processes is of undeniable and acute local, national and global relevance" (Royal Society of Arts, 2016, para. 13). Civil society groups are often where this work takes place. Yet research into civil society activity has shown that if you are poor and preoccupied with putting food on the table, then you are less likely to be involved in civil society activities (Mohan & Breeze, 2016). So, if we want to answer the question of how we can better intervene in society and who has the power to bring about social change, then we have to first address the question of why certain citizens and forms of civil society are largely excluded.

Depoliticization of Civil Society

When we look closely at political agency in civil society in the United Kingdom, there is clear evidence that British civil society has become *less* able to play an active role in democratic processes over the past decade as digital tools have multiplied. Rather, civil society has seen a deliberate hollowing out of its ability to be political (Independence Panel, 2015; Kiai, 2017). This has included legislation such as the *Lobbying Act*, which has had a chilling effect on civil society campaigning (Sheila McKechnie Foundation, 2018); *New Grants Standards* that have restricted recipients of public money if they engage in "advocacy" (Sloccock, 2017); the extension of the Preventing Violent Extremism agenda that has disproportionately been used to target Muslim organizations (Islamic Human Rights Commission, 2019); and increasing restrictions on the right to protest (see below). CSOs that are registered charities have faced particular hostilities from government ministers for being "too political" (Independence Panel, 2015). The Charity Commission has increasingly scrutinized charitable campaigning and issued guidance for the Brexit referendum and the 2019 general election that implied a more restrictive interpretation of charity law than previously. The danger is increasingly apparent that challenging powerful institutions in the United Kingdom is ever more seen as

outside the boundaries of legitimate civil society that are being increasingly drawn in favor of those that pose little or no threat to established structures of power.

The depoliticization of civil society has come within the context of austerity policies, and over 10 years of economic stagnation that have increased demand and reduced the capacity of civil society to meet it, including the ability to campaign for change. These pressures were exacerbated by COVID-19, which extended concerns of financial sustainability for the charity sector—especially BAME-led organizations (Murray, 2020)—while centering digital solutions as the answer to restrictions on physical contact.

Research undertaken by the author for the Civil Society Futures inquiry found that CSOs were often struggling to cope with restrictions on funding, the loss of public spaces, the impacts of public spending cuts, and increased difficulties in finding volunteers given ever-more-precarious work conditions (CSF, 2018). In addition, we found that there was a widespread sense that it was illegitimate for these organizations to undertake activities that could be considered “political,” stating that government policy was an inhibiting factor in their work. This was found to be a major block on their ability to effectively achieve their aims, such as protecting the natural world or addressing social inequalities. The research captured the more diffused impacts of these changes on the political activity of smaller CSOs and identified the multiple levels of silencing being experienced by these groups, where the pressure to stop or avoid political activities was accompanied by additional injunctions—often implicit—to not speak publicly about how their work was being affected. These dynamics often undermined their ability to act in ways that would most effectively create social change.

Within this broader context of limited political voice and agency, the research showed the crucial but ambiguous role that digital communications play for these small CSOs—apparent before and during the COVID-19 crisis, which forced work and daily life online. In their digital presence, civil society groups reported forms of *algorithmic silencing*, where several CSOs experienced a marked reduction in their online reach as a result of algorithmic changes within Facebook. One organization had their relevancy score downgraded so the content was being shown to only 1–2% of their page’s followers, with the only option for improving their “relevance” being to pay to boost their content, so it would be seen and shared by more people—a payment they could not afford. Overall, a common theme was that, contrary to oft-held assumptions about the expansion of voice in the digital age, *both* political agency *and* digital voice have shrunk in recent years for many civil society groups and organizations in the United Kingdom as a consequence of government policies that deter and constrain civil society activity directed at actual social change (because they are deemed to be “too political”) and a communications system that rewards only those with large and established followings (because they are more attractive to advertisers).

Information and Technology Inequalities

Economic inequality also maps onto information and technology inequalities (Trappel, 2019). Ofcom research (2022) shows that 6% of the UK population still does not have access to the Internet at home. This rises to 14% of those in lower socioeconomic households. In the United States, nearly 30% of the poorest households (with an income under \$30,000 a year) do not own a smartphone, in contrast with the 3% of the wealthiest households (over \$100,000 a year of income) who presumably have someone else use one on their behalf (Vogels, 2021). Despite having less access to technology, the poorest households spend far less in absolute terms but proportionately more of their disposable income on communications

services leading to what Golding (2017) terms a “citizen detriment” (p. 4313), a form of harm caused by economic inequality and the resulting lower levels of disposable income that prevent poorer communities from securing access to a healthy diet of information services. Digital exclusion extends to all of life—access to work, quality of education, availability of healthcare, costs of goods and services, and the ability to connect with loved ones as well as voice, information, and political participation. All of these exclusions also correlate to intersectional issues of race, social class, gender, and disability.

Economic exclusions are closely related to levels of *political power, privilege, and influence*. Davis, Fenton, Freedman, and Khiabany (2020) note the increasing power of a growing executive elite whose influence is often deliberately hidden from view and situated outside of the public sphere through private networks and communication channels that are invisible to most but exert influence through appointments to board positions, committees, and quangos to push the agenda in their favor. The extended power of a growing executive elite also favors a policy environment of “corporate libertarianism” (Pickard, 2014), where global corporations are given relative freedom to do as they please by governments who fiercely defend capitalist interests because, on the whole, capital is where their own interests lie. This extends to the long-established revolving door between major news organizations and the government that now spins to include the tech giants. The former UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson worked for the national daily newspaper the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Times*. Michael Gove, currently secretary of state for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, and minister for Intergovernmental Relations, was a *Times* journalist. George Osborne, former chancellor of the Exchequer, became editor of the *London Evening Standard*. Nick Clegg, former deputy prime minister (2010–2015) is now vice president for Global Affairs and Communications at Facebook. Clegg’s former special adviser, Verity Harding, was hired as a policy manager for Google DeepMind, which works on artificial intelligence. Google also hired Theo Bertram, a former advisor to prime ministers Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Bertram is now vice president of Government Relations and Public Policy for Europe at TikTok.

A report by Transparency International EU (2021) noted that three of Facebook’s five registered lobbyists were working in EU political institutions before joining the social media company. The revolving door of privilege often spins to benefit private gain. Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft spent more than half a billion dollars from 2005 to 2018, lobbying Congress in the United States, and have been central to the crafting of bilateral and multilateral free-trade agreements to their benefit (Mirrlees, 2020). These trends point toward the challenge of a renewed executive power where elite groups deploy their resources—their access to capital, their political influence, and their ideological congruence—to dominate and dictate the terms of contemporary media and tech systems. Whether this is in the form of tax-avoiding corporations and offshore billionaires; data brokers and infrastructure empires; or market-friendly politicians and captive regulators—the end result is the increasing concentration of money, power, and influence in ever fewer hands.

The meta-analytical category of enduring levels of inequality, the participatory exclusions this engenders, and the subsequent increasing concentrations of power and influence have a direct relationship to the ways in which tech companies operate (for corporate gain of the largest oligopolies the world has ever seen) and how big data configures society. Piketty and Goldhammer (2020) describe “inequality regimes” as the justification used for the institutional structures of inequality—the legal system, the educational system, the fiscal system—that organize and entrench inequality in societies. We can add datafication to this list as a further structural element that embeds and vindicates inequality.

Data Discrimination

The structural and infrastructural injustices noted above are expounded by data that drives discriminatory practices—whose data are used to inform what political and policy decisions impact directly on institutional strategies and policy decisions of governments and authorities. Research points to how software analyses of large sets of historical crime data are used for predictive policing to forecast where crime is likely to occur, perpetuating a vicious cycle of excessive surveillance and scrutiny in non-White, poorer neighbourhoods (O’Neil, 2016) that is often strikingly unreliable and reinforces discriminatory policing practices (Angwin, Larson, Mattu, & Kirchner, 2016). Chun (2019) notes that “algorithms perpetuate the discrimination they ‘find’—they are not simply descriptive but also prescriptive and performative in all senses of that word” (p. 66). Big-data extraction and algorithmic decision making based on massive forms of quantification, also hold interpretation captive, creating a pseudoscientific culture where what counts is only what can be counted. The human cost of decisions that digital technology has enabled are conveniently left out of the equation. Interpretation is fully mechanized and labeled artificial intelligence—a term that resists interrogation and challenge of the consequences it reaps. Patterns of discrimination have, of course, been with us since long before the Internet and data analytics. Structural inequalities have always been necessary for capital accumulation (Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018). In today’s digital age, this not only continues but intensifies through racially encoded algorithms that determine people’s “worthiness” (to access anything from a new job to a home loan) and entrench status differentials (Beauchamp, 2019; Benjamin, 2019; Noble, 2018). Milner and Traub (2021) refer to this as data capitalism and algorithmic racism:

[A]n economic model built on the extraction and commodification of data and the use of big data and algorithms as tools to concentrate and consolidate power in ways that dramatically increase inequality along lines of race, class, gender and disability . . . racial inequality is a feature not a bug of data capitalism. (p. 1)

They point to policy decisions as being the driver of data capitalism over and above technological progress. We can see this happening currently in the United Kingdom with the so-called “Online Safety Bill.” The bill promises to introduce new protections for the public from hate, abuse, and other harmful content online. But in doing so, it has bowed down to the press lobby and made news publishers’ websites and newspaper comment sections exempt. So the racism, conspiracy theories, and other harmful information on these platforms are exempt too. Press comment sections in the United Kingdom are rife with disinformation, abuse, and the most extreme forms of racism. Moderation is often minimal, and the comments that are deliberately inflammatory are often prioritized to generate the most clicks. The current proposals may clamp down on the fringe extremists of Twitter (and rightly so), but exclude the professionalized, organized, and well-funded extremism of forums whose *raison d’être* is the spread of racism, hate, and other harms. What we are left with is a policy approach to data justice that is anything but. Rather, it is an easy, market-friendly fix that explicitly avoids the very idea that structural injustices exist.²

² The Online Safety Bill is currently (February 2023) being debated in Parliament after significant delays. It has moved through the House of Commons and is now being debated in the House of Lords with the opportunity to consider amendments before finally receiving Royal Assent.

Legislative Frameworks of Constraint and Repression in the United Kingdom

The above policy restrictions and tech constraints on civil society's ability to intervene are being further aggravated by new powers for the police over protests, and new sentences for serious crimes in the controversial new "Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022." The bill adds to already increased restrictions on the right to protest and call strike action. The National Council for Voluntary Organizations and other civil society groups opposed the additional restrictions to the right to protest and measures that target Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities in particular, stating that the expansive policing and sentencing powers further entrench racial disparity in the criminal justice system (National Council of Voluntary Organizations, Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organizations, & Small Charities Coalition, 2021). The bill can impose a start and finish time to static protests, set noise limits, and apply these rules to a demonstration of just one person. It makes it an offense to "intentionally or recklessly cause public nuisance" (Home Office, 2022, Section 78) a move designed to stop people from occupying public spaces, blocking roads, or employing other noisy and "annoying" tactics to get their voices heard. Big data and digital-surveillance technologies lend false justification to these frameworks of constraint that further disguise and cover over structural inequalities that are heavily racialized and discriminatory. Figures for 2019–2020 in England and Wales show that Black people are nine times more likely to be stopped and searched by the police than White people, for example, over suspicion of possessing drugs (Home Office, 2020), and far more likely to be sent to prison for drug offences than White offenders (Sentencing Council, 2020). The government's increasing powers during the pandemic have been applied through the same racist prism. As Harris, Joseph-Salisbury, Williams, and White (2021) note, even as crime levels fell during the first lockdown, stop and search more than doubled, with Black people in London up to 11 times more likely to be targeted.

The above discussion illustrates that when we talk about political participation and political exclusions, we are not only talking about redistributive justice such as economic ability to access resources and the concentration of wealth and power in ever fewer hands, but we are also talking about social and communicative justice (Young, 2022): the "institutional conditions necessary for the development and exercise of individual capacities and collective communication and cooperation" (Young, 2014, p. 3). When such institutional conditions rely so heavily on data metrics, then communicative justice cannot be achieved without data justice. Socio structural dimensions of exclusion that pivot on distribution of economic resources are intricately related to forms of communicative and data justice that will enable people to become "visible, audible and knowable" (Gangadharan, 2021, p. 113) and form a key part of the regimes of inequality that prevent this.

Realizing Data Justice

This discussion indicates that a democratic future including data justice requires a disentanglement of the state and civil society from market entrenchment and a harnessing of data for the public good and in public ownership rather than for private gain and profit. If we accept that enduring levels of economic inequality is a meta-analytical issue traceable across social, economic, political, and technological domains with extensive consequences for civic participation, then we must acknowledge that to change this direction of travel requires means of redistribution (of power and wealth) as well as means of equal recognition (for democratic politics to take place). It requires political and economic alternatives that are just and inclusive, socially regenerative, and

ecologically wise, shifting economic and political power back to communities and public democratic institutions. In other words, conceiving of a datafied society that supports a newly imagined democratic political economy means conceiving of a world that could exist beyond capitalism. This is no mean feat.

Building on the work of Nancy Fraser (Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018) and other work undertaken as part of the Media Reform Coalition's development of a *A Manifesto for a People's Media* (Media Reform Coalition [MRC], 2021; see also Fenton, Freedman, Schlosberg, & Dencik, 2020), I have tried to envisage what this might look like in relation to media and technology. Borrowing from and adapting the work of Fraser, I outline below three key normative criteria as a starting point to consider what a politics of redistribution and recognition might mean for data justice to be realized. To be truly transformational, all three criteria must be met.

Structural Socio-economic Parity

This speaks to Fraser's intervention on the importance of "nondomination" and refers to both external structural factors relating to the broader environment that media and tech industries function within and to internal structural factors relating to the workforce and working practices of the organizations themselves. The principle of structural socioeconomic parity clearly runs counter to concentration of media and tech ownership, including that tech giants are now the largest oligopolies the world has ever seen. Structural change must confront and dismantle these forms of power to include both large-scale forms of governance and localized forms of production and collective management.

Ownership matters, but dismantling and limiting concentration of media ownership only takes us so far. It may relax the stranglehold of power that certain media/tech corporations exert, but it does not necessarily alter the neoliberal nature of the system they operate within. So, it is crucial to enable, support, and sustain forms of media/tech ownership that are *not for profit* and fully independent of commercial pressures and government preferences, are organized cooperatively and democratically, and are responsive to the needs of the communities they serve rather than at the behest of the market. Birkinbine (2018) takes this a stage further and refers to the need for "subversive commoning" that foregrounds economic justice through a focus on redistribution and circulation of wealth rather than its extraction to avoid a detour back to capitalism. Here, ownership within a media/tech commons is based on a critique of the exploitations of capitalism such that it can bring about a change in social relations over time through the reproduction of mutuality, care, trust, and conviviality.³

Ideas relating data to commoning and cooperative principles⁴ are now readily discussed by media and communications scholars: Pariser (2020) talks about building online public parks to reclaim the Internet as a

³ Conviviality names a praxis of living together well and has been revived through the concept of convivialism in "the Second Convivialist Manifesto" (Convivialist International, 2020), where the principle of common humanity and equal human dignity are seen as essential components of conviviality.

⁴ The concepts of data cooperatives and data commons are often used interchangeably but have distinctions. A commons is often a more informally constituted space or resource that members may use but not necessarily contribute to directly and refers more generally to the shared use of land, water, or, indeed, media. A cooperative is often more clearly defined by members who contribute to it and share governance of it for the benefit of a particular community it serves. However, these are not hard-and-fast distinctions,

public space. Drawing inspiration from the ambition and vision of the early BBC and public television (PBS) and radio (NPR) networks in the United States, Zuckerman (2020) has called for a digital public infrastructure for the widespread adoption of new public-service digital media tools enabling a diversity of platforms to serve a diversity of cultures, giving communities control over governance. Both propose funding from taxing digital advertising. Murdock (2018) proposes building a digital commons “with public service broadcasters as the central hub in an online space that would combine the holdings and expertise of established public cultural institutions with the energy and creativity of grassroots activity on the Internet” (p. 43). In a similar manner, Andrejevic (2013) argues for a new public service media sector for the digital age to include social media, search, and other information-sorting and communication utilities. These echo policy proposals from the former leader of the UK Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, who spoke about creating a British Digital Corporation (BDC) using noncommercial operating systems and software, alongside the development of a public search engine based on social value rather than ability to sell advertising—a modern, democratized public platform and network, fully representative of its audiences and completely independent of government and commercial pressures.

The Ada Lovelace Institute and the AI Council (2021) in the United Kingdom are investigating data trusts and data cooperatives. A data trust is a proposed mechanism for individuals to take the data rights that are set out in law and pool these into an organization—a trust—in which trustees would exercise the data rights conferred by the law on behalf of the trust’s beneficiaries. A data cooperative has the main purpose of the stewardship of data for the benefit of members.

In different ways, all the above seek to remove the dominance of the tech giants and their data control with a shift away from data for capital accumulation to data for the public interest. However, as Prainsack (2019) points out, such approaches rarely tackle “categories, practices and effects of exclusion” (p. 3)—whether this refers to exclusion from data and information entering a digital commons; using data in the digital commons; or benefitting from or participating in the governance of the digital commons. A focus on structural socioeconomic parity requires not only a leveling of the playing field but a disruption of the oppressions and injustices on which the current neoliberal order depends, to build socioeconomic power that is owned and governed by those who live its effects. In other words, I am not advocating here for amorphous inclusivity but for mechanisms and practices of redistribution and recognition. For example, in New Zealand, data practices privileged the dominant NZ European Pākehā population, leaving indigenous Māori communities with unequal access to data about COVID-19 (Cormac & Kukutai, 2020). Yet in Canada, unjust data practices led First Nations Information Governance Center to demand indigenous data sovereignty.

Substantively Meaningful Democracy

As structural socioeconomic parity means getting rid of inequalities, so it is also related to the internal plurality and power dynamics of organizations. To meet these challenges, we urgently need a media

and much blurring is evident in the literature. Importantly, neither are they necessarily postcapitalist in design and require situating in a critical framework that can take account of the three normative criteria set out above to be so. The special issue of *Popular Communication* on “Rethinking the Communication Commons” (Birkinbine & Kidd, 2020) is particularly instructive in setting out how all commons are not necessarily egalitarian or meaningfully democratic and the structures that are required to address power imbalances and “support an intersectional shift in power relations” (Kidd, 2020).

system that is explicitly designed to work for democracy and in the public good and media organizations that are themselves democratically constituted. If we see data as part of a shared public information and communications resource necessary for a healthy functioning democracy—a form of public utility—then for communicative justice to be realized, we have to shift from viewing data as primarily commodity for corporate entities to shared resources that can be not only co-owned but also co-governed by the users and workers according to their own rules and norms. Democracy speaks to the capacity of publics to act collectively and bring about change and so requires a reckoning with power.

An organization designed to operate democratically must recognize ways in which the media industry in all its various guises has held certain people back—Black people, old people, disabled people, working-class people—and seek to counter those forms of discrimination by taking special measures to compensate for the social and economic inequalities of unjust social structures in full recognition of the different yet connected structural conditions of class, racial, and hetero-patriarchal domination. This recognizes that power is relational—most of these problems did not start with the media or tech industries and cannot be solved just by changing how they work. The struggle for a democratic media is also a fight to devolve power more generally and to give communities more control over their lives. So, what might it mean to think of our media/tech landscape in terms of sharing power?

One attempt at embedding democratic practice are cooperatives. A cooperative is an autonomous association of people who have come together voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise. According to the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), there are over 3 million cooperatives operating around the world based on values of self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity. Media and platform co-ops are on the rise. The Global Newsletter for Cooperatives active in Industry Services (CICOPA, 2017) reported that there had been a 27% increase in co-ops in the field of information and communications around the world, with many emerging in response to the need to preserve pluralism, escape commercial and state pressures, and ensure independent journalism. Most of these are worker cooperatives with democratic governance at their core. Part of the growth is because of the emergence of platform cooperatives where users and/or workers ultimately own and control the platforms or mobile app (Scholz & Schneider, 2016) to trade, connect people, and pool resources or data.

It is not always clear how meaningful the democratic ownership and governance of co-ops is in practice. There are many different types of co-ops offering different forms of democratic governance. Multistakeholder co-ops have a broader membership and can include workers, service users, volunteers, local authorities, and more, and hence provide the most inclusive form of democratic governance involving the communities they are embedded within. Worker co-ops are owned and run by the people who work in them who have an equal say in what the organization does and how it develops and an equitable share of the wealth created. Linking this to theories of the commons, de Peuter and Dyer-Witherford (2010) talk of the worker co-ops where the “workplace is an *organizational commons*, the labour performed is a *commoning practice*, and the surplus generated, a *commonwealth*” (p. 45, emphasis in the original) to build what Gibson-Graham (2006) calls a “generative commons” (p. 17). Workers’ co-ops are not without criticism and have been variously described as being too small scale to make any difference, too weak to counteract capital (Hahnel, 2005) and even as a means of revitalizing capitalism by improving employee morale (Reeves, 2007).

What cooperative models sometimes forget is that we need to have the capacity to be political equals, which is why this criteria works only in combination with structural socioeconomic parity and worker and environmental sustainability. As Dussel (2008) notes,

Excluded persons should not be *included* (which would be rather like introducing the Other into the Same) in the *old* system. Rather they should participate as equals in a *new institutional moment* (the new political order). The goal is not *inclusion* but *transformation*. (p. 39, emphasis in the original)

Worker and Environmental Justice

To avoid these dubious fates of co-option by capitalism, co-ops and the commons must be part of a broader movement for transformational change geared toward long-term sustainability. The fullest possible realization of the sort of democratic egalitarian values expressed above can be achieved only by transcending the current system of institutionalized global capitalism through the reorganization of the modes of production and reproduction, so many of them gain control over their lives and work in a manner that is environmentally just. There are increasing examples of workers in the tech industry as well as in datafied workplaces, organizing to resist things like employer surveillance and to campaign for better, more just pay and conditions. In January 2021, it was announced that Google workers from around the world were coming together to form a global union alliance—Alpha Global—comprised of 13 different unions in 10 countries, including the United States and the United Kingdom. Alpha Global is affiliated to UNI Global Union, a federation of labor unions representing 20 million people worldwide, including workers at Amazon. Milner and Traub (2021) note that in the United States:

Activists and community groups are organising against geographic and economic displacement by tech companies—including opposition to public subsidies for corporations that siphon resources away from community needs, tech-driven gentrification that displaces lower-income Black and brown residents in favour of more affluent and whiter tech employees, and the anti-union stance of many tech companies that degrades job quality. . . . communities have also taken action against the local environmental impact of massive data centers located in their midst. (p. 28)

Systemic change means addressing the structural causes of poverty and economic inequality through redistributive mechanisms of wealth, including ideas such as the four-day working week and universal basic income. It means foregrounding class, gender, and racial subordination and political domination by sharing and redistributing power through processes of radically substantive democracy. It introduces a new logic of decommodification of the social commons where our institutions are reclaimed as part of the commons for the public good. It means refusing ever-increasing levels of extraction, production, and consumption promulgated by tech companies.⁵

⁵ As noted above, the MRC has developed a Manifesto for a People's Media (Media Reform Coalition, 2021)—to try to imagine what a media/tech commons might be that could fit this transformative vision for our media/tech futures with a vision for a media sector that is independent, democratic, accountable, and for everyone.

Conclusion

I have argued that to understand what civic participation in a datafied society could become, we need to first interrogate the meaning and practices of injustices more readily conceived of in socioeconomic realms. The contemporary characteristics of advanced capitalism have brought to the fore structures of inequality and discrimination that are part of our social order. They result in who owns what, the forms of labor we have, the nature of production, the means of exchange, the operation of the markets, and the various stresses and injuries these exert on daily lives lived in debt, insecurity, and in fear—all of which are deeply uneven. Regimes of inequality that function through things like legislative frameworks of constraint and repression that inhibit civil society resistance are also manifest in information and technology inequalities and forms of data discrimination—all of which perpetuate and entrench power differentials. I have tried to point to some of the ways in which these structural and infrastructural inequalities are embedded in social, political, economic, and technological relations and are applicable across Western (neo)liberal democracies.

Foregrounding socioeconomic injustices enmeshed with communicative and data injustices orients our critical analysis toward an evaluation of the participatory democratic qualities of public life and the possibilities for social change. Although equality requires state intervention to bring into being a people capable of self-rule, democracy also demands the dilution of centralized political power through dissemination. Both run counter to neoliberal politics and economics. Attempts to redress these injustices have come to the fore through the concept and praxis of the commons experiencing a revival as a perspective set in stark contrast to and in criticism of the privatization, deregulation, and expropriation of neoliberalism with a focus on a more equitable, ecologically, and socioeconomically just society. Similarly, work on cooperatives seek to redistribute power and wealth by establishing structures that are inclusively managed, decentralized, and participatory to prevent or limit corporate or state exploitation. These are not presented here as ideal alternatives but as a means of opening up the capacity to imagine the possibility of a better state of things.

A transformative politics responsive to this critique requires public forms of ownership and social control of finance—the commons as an alternative to capitalism rather than the commons as a substitute for the welfare state (Broumas, 2017). In its most subversive form, it is neither a desperate attempt at clawing back national Keynesianism nor a means of simply establishing a mixed economy through regulatory controls on capital. A politics of subversive commoning requires the displacing of a fixation on economic growth to a focus on meeting social needs and creating the conditions where we can all live together better—more equitably, more democratically, more inclusively, more convivially, and more sustainably. To these ends, realizing data justices will never be about the tweaking or taming of capitalism through regulatory or technical fixes, but rather, will be rooted in solidarity networks built on historical struggles over the (re)distribution and recognition of public goods, rights, and freedoms. Civic participation in a datafied society will only ever be fully realized as part of a transformative politics that can advance equality, offer substantively meaningful democracy, worker and environmental justice.

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