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What Mobilises People to Go Against Big Tech?

A report by

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Introduction

Our life has become inseparable from digital data. Every aspect of our lives has been datafied, from our health systems, to banking, transportation, work, love, education and family – different platforms are used to render our social lives into data in various ways.

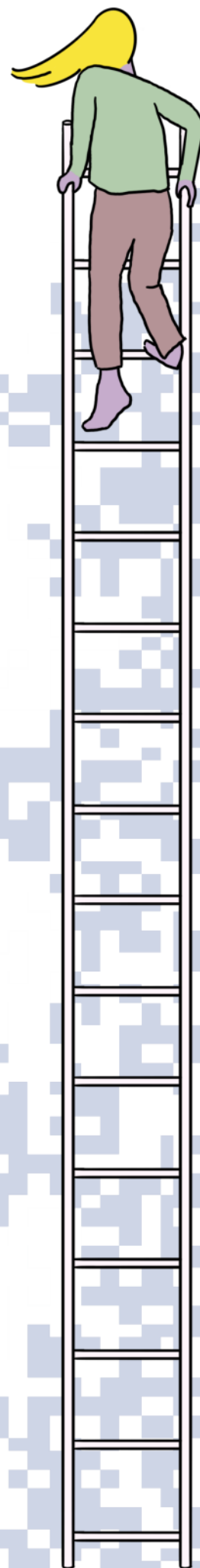
But while governments, influenced by technology companies PR campaigns, try to tell us this is progress and the way forward to achieve innovation, we are not really given any other options. So, when companies discriminate specific groups of people (typically women, people of color, LGBTQI+, poor people and other marginalised groups) because 'the algorithm told them', society is left without appropriate guards, and no one seems to be responsible. At the same time, people from poorer backgrounds, such as low earners, older generations, refugees and asylum seekers, cannot afford stable, private, and secure internet access and therefore, they are excluded from essential services and democratic participation (Dixon, 2022). This phenomenon has been defined as 'data poverty' to demonstrate the perpetuation of existing social inequalities to the digital landscape (Dixon, 2022: 11- 16).

In this datafied society, people have become more aware of power imbalances, specifically regarding the ways big technology companies¹ use and abuse their data. From the Snowden revelations to Cambridge Analytica, and the premature death of Molly Russell – people understand that there are real and material consequences to the ways big-tech (Facebook/Meta, Amazon, Apple, Google/Alphabet) intervene in their everyday lives. These include physical/mental health (self)harm, discrimination of life opportunities (jobs/mortgages/insurance), price discrimination, voter suppression, increased hate crimes/violence/harassment/bullying, and being influenced by mis/dis-information/conspiracy theories. However, while people get glimpses of the harm these companies cause through these cases, many feel powerless against them.

While some argue that people are resigned (Draper & Turrow, 2019), others say that people feel apathy or cynicism, specifically about their online privacy and feel that things are 'inevitable' (Hargittai and Marwick, 2016). This feeling of things being 'inevitable', has been examined by Lina Dencik, who describes these attitudes as surveillance realism (2019), a situation whereby people have accepted and 'give up' trying to resist or create alternative narratives because the surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019) narrative became so dominant and natural.

Our research on UK citizens' data literacies (Carmi & Yates, 2023) shows that people do care but do not know what to do about it. So, while these technologies move fast and break our societies, it is not always clear to people what they can actually do about these injustices, whether they happen to them or their community. After all, even when dedicated digital rights activists like Max Schrems (from the Non of Your Business organisation) try to go against behemoths like Facebook, the process takes years (4.5 and counting).

And so, we are left to ask - what can we actually do about this? And what mobilises people to act against big-tech? In this report we are trying to answer this question by asking digital rights NGO practitioners about their experience with their campaigns. Asking what works and what does not work can hopefully shed light on possible ways forward for society to take.



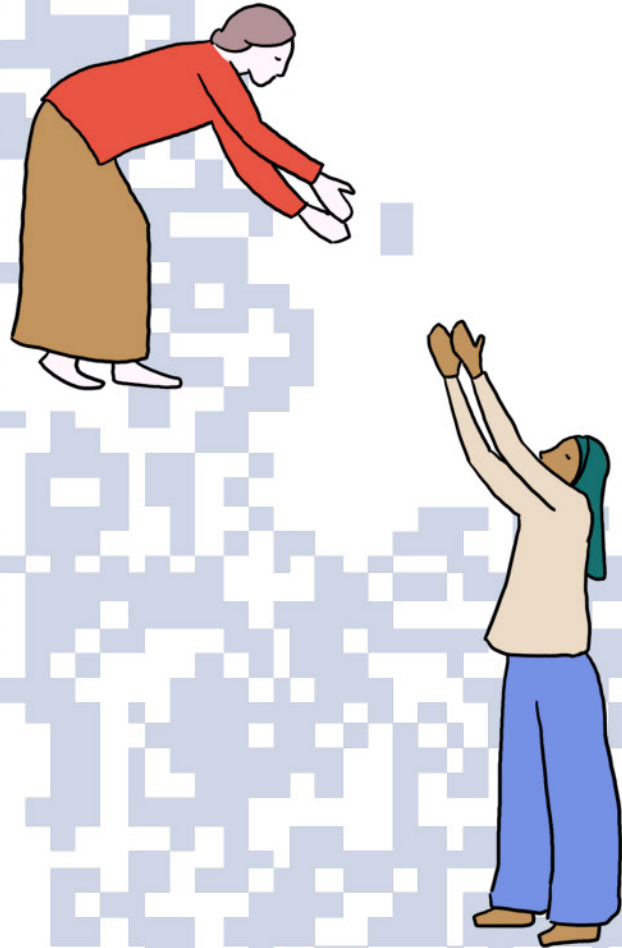
The civic rights and agency field explored

In today's data-driven society, the unprecedented growth of technology and its incorporation in daily aspects of life, specifically in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, has given rise to new concerns and threats. With the increasing reliance on digital platforms and services, and the extraction of vast amounts of personal and collective data (Hintz et al., 2022), the concepts of 'data citizenship', 'data literacy' and 'digital rights social movements' have emerged as crucial aspects of the digital ecosystem. In this section, we will briefly show what are the key debates around these concepts to put the insights we found in context.

DATA CITIZENSHIP

Data citizenship is what people can think and do about and with their data in democratic societies, it is about citizens' agency, rights and responsibilities over their data and interactions. Citizens' digital rights are usually examined in the context of the digital surveillance they are constantly under (Kazansky & Milan, 2021), the networked privacy they practice (Hargittai & Marwick, 2016) and freedom of expression/ access to information (Taylor, 2017) while ensuring that citizens can, in fact, exercise their data rights² in a democratic society (Dixon, 2022) in an effective and meaningful way. Exercising digital rights can facilitate (pro)active civic participation, and ethical engagement with data-related activities (Carmi et al., 2020).

However, part of the problem is that digital rights, their consent mechanisms and enforcement (Carmi, 2021), are often too focused on the individual inspired by Western philosophies that centre the individual as a 'rational' and 'informed' decision-maker. But this approach neglects to consider various social inequalities that prevents people from being 'informed', and the various manipulations that are used to push people's emotional buttons. According to the Norwegian Consumer Council (henceforth NCC) report 'Enough Deception!' (2022) exploring Norwegian consumers' experiences with deceptive design, 68% of Norwegian consumers experienced and reported 'forced registration' mechanisms when using an online service. Other deception designs included hidden costs and location-tracking (NCC, 2022: 18 – 22). Moreover, few companies such as – Alphabet (Google), Amazon, Apple, Meta Platforms (Facebook) and Microsoft concentrate data processing abilities, essentially operating as 'gatekeepers' of digital



data (Ada Lovelace Institute, 2022). In other words, people's choice to make informed and rational decisions are engineered in various ways.

Although many people say that they care about their digital rights, they often adopt behaviours that seem contradictory to their claims, for example, by clicking 'I agree' to all the consent pop-ups they receive, what is sometimes called the 'privacy paradox' (Barnes, 2006). This feeling of 'powerlessness' (Arriaga, 2014) reflects a wider societal concern in civic participation further exacerbated in the digital realm. Draper and Turow (2019) use the term 'digital resignation' to describe citizens' sentiments of helplessness, fatigue, and cynicism over the power imbalance between big-tech.

At the same time, a legal framework that works effectively to protect citizens' rights is missing (Carmi, 2021). A recent example can be seen in the news in the end of July 2023 that Google has updated its privacy policy saying it reserves the right to scrape everything you post online to build its AI tools (Germain, 2023). While we wait for the legal system to decide whether this is actually legal (with the recent announcement of the class action against ChatGPT's extractive practices of people's data without their consent in California), society is further harmed within an 'exploitative, shortsighted, and disempowering' digital ecosystem (Ada Lovelace Institute, 2020). Persuading citizens to invest time and effort to change this power asymmetry remains a challenge (Daskal, 2018). This challenge is also related to people's data literacies, which include understanding what is happening with their data and critically understanding how the online ecosystem works (Carmi et al., 2020).

DATA LITERACY AND JUSTICE

The growing reliance on data-driven technologies stresses the need for digital education (Hintz et al., 2022) that will teach people to understand and do things in a way that fits them. In previous years, this education received different names, depending on the media technologies of the time, such as: 'information literacy' (Doyle, 1994), 'media literacy' (Aufderheide, 1992), 'algorithmic literacy' (Katell, et al. 2020) and 'data literacy' (Pangrazio & Selwyn, 2019; Carmi et al., 2020; Pangrazio & Sefton-Green, 2020). **Data literacy is an umbrella term, which is often contested (Fotopoulou, 2021), but broadly refers to the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to critically understand, analyse, interpret, and communicate with and about data.** It can provide people with self-efficacy (Martens & Hobbs, 2015), informed decision-making and civic engagement (Cohen & Kahne, 2012) in the datafied society. Data literacy may include formal, personal, and folk pedagogies of data, depending on the types and uses of the data as well as the educational practices employed (Pangrazio & Sefton-Green, 2020). In particular, formal pedagogies are applied in school or work environments, personal pedagogies concern everyday digital practices, while folk pedagogies operate in the context of public awareness campaigning (Pangrazio & Sefton-Green, 2020).

Nevertheless, many approaches to data literacy adopt a 'transactional' perspective assuming that once certain skills (such as the understanding of media manipulation techniques) are learnt, data literacy has been achieved (Mihailidis, 2018). This neglects the fact that people need ongoing learning and support mechanisms to address and respond to new and emerging technologies. In addition, this often results in citizens' digital resignation (Draper & Turow, 2019) and cynical attitudes towards data engagement (Mihailidis, 2018: 155). Most importantly, data literacy is frequently associated with individuals' responsibility to become literate which may create unfair equation whereby people become responsible when things 'go wrong' (Kazan-sky, 2015). In this context, data inequalities and power imbalances lead to the emergence of the concept of 'data justice' (Taylor, 2017; Dencik et. al., 2022) and the need to develop citizens' 'digital social capital' (Martens & Hobbs, 2015).

The term 'data justice' is directly linked with 'data literacy' to enable the citizens to 'think and act critically' (Yates et al., 2021; Carmi & Yates, 2023), make responsible choices online (Martens & Hobbs, 2015) and become pro-active citizens. To this end, data literacy goes beyond the individual level to the networked societal level in order to inspire civic engagement, what Yates and Carmi (2022) call networks of literacy. Data justice goes hand in hand with individual digital rights

but also the 'capability of individuals to identify data (ab)uses and respond to them' (Carmi & Yates, 2023: 3621). Thus, the starting point for resistance can be achieved by providing citizens with data literacy skills such as awareness, knowledge and tools about the ways to resist existing power asymmetries.

To explore the levels, forms, and opportunities for data literacy considering social imaginaries is important. With this term we mean the assumed shared values, concerns, possibilities and expectations about digital citizenship, which have been incorporated into the literature (Kazansky & Milan, 2021: 364). Social imaginaries play an integral role in social and political life (Schinkel, 2017) and operate as a mechanism for social representation (Castoriadis, 1975). The construction and promotion of these imaginaries may rely on dominant actors and institutions such as the government and the media. As Kazansky and Milan (2021: 377) suggest, the development of counter-imaginaries of what the 'datafied society' (Carmi & Yates, 2023; Van Dijck, 2014) can and should be, is crucial for civil society as resistance to dominant discourses.



DIGITAL RIGHTS SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Although social movements have been using digital technologies since the 1990s (Etter & Albu, 2021) the focus of previous literature is movement-specific and thus missing insights on how those involved use digital media for political engagement (Ilten & McInerney, 2019). Political social movements often rely on the use of big tech such as Meta (Facebook) and Twitter, in particular, as a place for digital assembling and social mobilisation (Barassi & Treré, 2012; Breindl, 2013). Platforms are used for the protection of the citizens' political rights (for example, the Indignados movement and the decidim.barcelona movement in Spain, for more, please see: Peña-López, 2019), but also highlight the need to safeguard the political and social rights of using these same tools and platforms.

As the digital realm expands its influence on various aspects of society, the need to protect people's rights and liberties has become increasingly important. Digital rights movements have emerged as a response to growing concerns about online privacy, surveillance, censorship, and other infringements on civil liberties in the digital era. The aims of these social movements focus on promoting awareness about digital rights, and the change of the current power asymmetries (Breindl, 2013: 1432) and establish social justice through different forms of resistance.

At times, social movements about digital social justice overlap with other social mobilisation initiatives such as environmental and climate justice (Kazansky, et al., 2022). These movements are rooted in the intersection of citizens' rights as a response to digital and environmental risks stemming from 'limitless growth' of industrial practices as well as the institutional power imbalance of big tech companies and the citizenry (Kazansky, et al., 2022). The recent report from Engine Room on the connection between digital rights and climate/environmental justice (Kazansky et al., 2022), provides an overview of the experiences of practitioners who work across digital rights, big tech, and environmental, climate justice issues and suggest the fostering of connections, common vocabularies and solidarity across communities and sectors to address 'harmful, unsustainable, and unjust dynamics' related to big tech.



Developing cooperation among multiple actors and cross-sectors fighting big-tech relies on the construction of shared imaginaries and values that not only inspire the communities involved to collectively imagine their world, but also to change it and shape their future (Castoriadis, 1975). According to the Data Justice Lab's report about civic participation (Hintz et al., 2022: 7), some of the imaginaries that were reflected in digital rights social movements concerned the treatment of data as a public good, the accountability of data processing actors, as well as the institutionalisation of citizens' bodies and networks in policy making.



Methodology

In order to understand what mobilises citizens to challenge big tech companies, semi-structured interviews were conducted with digital rights and digital literacies organisations during March-April 2023.

The participants were approached by email and were asked to dedicate an hour of their time which would be compensated. The interviews were conducted over Zoom and recorded on the PI's laptop. The interviews were transcribed by the software that recorded the interview, and then revised by the research assistant for typos and other errors made by the automated transcription software. The text was analysed using critical discourse analysis to highlight the key themes that emerge from the interviews.

The participants who were willing to identify themselves are:

Rachel Coldicutt – Careful Trouble
Silkie Carlo – Big Brother Watch
Sam Gregory – Witness
Mahsa Alimardani – Article 19

Ethics

Participants were sent consent forms about the use of their data and were informed about their ability to withdraw at any moment. All data was deleted from the devices of the PI and the Research Assistant once the report was completed.

What mobilises people against big data?

1. CONTEXTUAL AWARENESS

In the interviews with NGO practitioners, it was evident that people care about their data but develop their awareness depending on the context it emerges. Oftentimes, digital harms and abuses are seen as distant, complex, and abstract. However, when people experience first-hand fraud or romance scam (e.g. catfishing), then they become aware and concerned. As one of our participants mentioned:

A lot of urgent online threats are not commonly understood because they're not commonly experienced. People don't care about things if they can't imagine it happening to them.

The concept of social imagination/imaginaries is crucial here, as only those who imagine they might be at risk online think and act critically about their digital rights (Carmi & Yates, 2023). Experiencing breaches of privacy, bullying and harassment and other threats online as part of people's everyday context (whether individual or shared with their community) mobilises them to explore avenues to increase their data literacy and think critically about what they can do to object and negotiate big tech power.

There are, of course, types of digital harms that have gained more attention than others in academic, political, media, and public discourses. Protecting those considered vulnerable groups online, such as children and young people (Livingstone, 2018), is a representative example of this. Dangerous online games, exposure to pornographic content, gambling, and interactions that may harm underaged people in the digital realm have grasped the public concern and thus increased awareness in this context. Apart from child safety, other issues more frequently discussed in the media concern mental health and sexual harassment. Unsurprisingly, citizens have absorbed this information developing and performing a more critical stance about the use of digital technology platforms in these specific contexts. One of the participants claimed that:

I think particularly around child safety kind of mental health issues, you know... suicide, content, and things like that, for what I think people are very aware of, and many people have experienced.

Thus, in the experience of NGO practitioners, citizens are more wor-



ried about the digital safety and rights of specific groups that may be considered vulnerable online. Moreover, with the rise of specific social issues such as suicides (often linked to identity theft, online scams, cyberbullying, and privacy breaches) and sexual assaults (especially in the aftermath of the #metoo movement) people have established critical responses to the uses of digital technologies and their data. Nevertheless, contextual awareness does not resolve the lack of widespread concern over digital citizenship (ab)uses.

2. REAL OR IMAGINED CONCERNS

In the discussion with NGO practitioners, it was evident that their experience and interaction with the public illustrated a new pattern of combined real and imagined concerns. Citizens may develop and share imagined concerns that do not reflect pragmatic threats to digital citizenship. For example, this happened during the launch of the UK emergency alert which was tested among UK citizens' phones as explained by one of our participants:

Have you seen all this, this chat about the UK emergency alerts going out on phones? (...) I think it's probably just general contingency if there were serious attacks, or you know, serious risks to life on a mass scale. For us, it's not really a concern. But there's been a huge response to it, and like opinion pieces and loads of panic online and from commentators.

This example demonstrates the panic that may be shared across the public, due to the lack of digital literacy, to identify what the real threats are, as has been indicated in previous research, too (Hintz, et al., 2022). Moreover, without knowledge and confidence in using

digital tools, citizens assume that technology is more powerful than them (almost magical) and thus there is little to do about it. Equally, a lot of public attention surrounds the digital footprint of young people and children seen as vulnerable. At the same time, some of the participants commented on the fact that young people now have high levels of digital literacy over their digital presence. As one of our participants argues:

I think one of the challenges with that is like any the slight kind of gap between as in the kids who are learning about digital literacy today in schools, so much more digitally, proficient and digitally native, than a lot of people who work in digital policy.

As we showed in our previous research (Carmi & Yates, 2023), not all young people are 'digitally natives' as commonly presented by the media and scholars, and many adults may lack the access, familiarity, and application of digital pedagogies in their digital life. Similarly, those working with people in the Middle East expanded on citizens' distrust in Western big-tech. People in these regions are dissatisfied with the local regime and worry that the government may be controlling, monitoring, or shaping digital data. Here again, people's contextual everyday experience shapes how they understand these problems and how they respond accordingly.

At the same time, as the practitioners observe, crucial risks regarding digital rights are being undermined or ignored. The right to privacy has been shifted especially in the aftermath of the covid-19 pandemic where people were expected to carry digital vaccine passports and scan QR codes to go to venues. One of our participants mentioned that at the Big Brother Watch they found cases where thousands of phones had been tracked around vaccination centres, monitoring people's behaviour without their knowledge or consent. Moreover, the perpetual reliance on big-tech seems inescapable, as one of our interviewees said:

We cannot not use Google, because all of our work stuff is on Google Docs and Gmail. And occasionally you try using Bing and [it] is a bit rubbish, and you can't find the information you need, and okay, there's maybe privacy browsers. But you don't really know so much about them. The products of big technology companies have just become the default.

Not only citizens, but NGOs and civic organisations also find it difficult to avoid using these platforms. Most importantly, when things go wrong and issues arise, there is little power to challenge digital rights abuses through the data companies' mechanisms. This context impacts not only the freedom of expression but also the freedom of thought. As one of our participants argues:

You might argue that freedom of thought is impacted because the way that we're perceiving the world around us is being shaped at such a granular level.

In the 'post-truth' era and with the hesitance to believe what is on the internet, citizens find it difficult to identify real from fake news. This is further amplified by the undermining of the content produced by citizen journalists and human rights sources. Existing social issues shape the digital ecosystem and often not recognising that this is a broader societal problem maintains current inequalities, as one of our participants argues:

Concerns about how digital harms in that environment reflect existing harms in their existing environment, which are rather existing digital harms or existing harms that are broader and can't be just placed in the digital realm, right? So, targeting of activists, surveillance by the State, attempts to claim that the information of activists and human rights defenders is false. So, all of the concerns often actually bubble back to the same underlying concerns that impact activists and human rights defenders, right?.

These tangible threats can cause significant harm, impacting individuals communities, and even entire societies. The realm of imagined risks and underestimation of real ones also looms large as misinformation and disinformation proliferate, giving rise to the erosion of trust, polarization, and social injustices.

3. WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR CREATING AND SOLVING THE PROBLEMS

Another key theme emerging from the interviews was the aim to identify who is responsible for creating and solving problems related to digital harms and risks. Most participants considered big-tech to be responsible for digital citizenship abuses. The participants used the term 'capitalism' as an umbrella term to describe threats online such as dataveillance and extraction. As NGO practitioners they declared disapproval of specific digital companies dominating the digital realm, a sentiment that is shared across the wider population of users, too, as one of our participants argues:

People reporting dissatisfaction with the dominating role of Big Tech reflecting on suspicions and conspiracy theories due to the lack of trust in Western Big companies.

By prioritising corporate profits, many feel big-tech lacks legitimacy and generates suspicion across the public regarding the way they handle people's data. At the same time, big-tech were also considered instrumental in changing the landscape and establishing a fairer and safer digital ecosystem. The participants suggested the adoption of a more transparent policy by data companies that would allow citizens to make more informed decisions about the use of their digital footprint. Moreover, user-friendly policies and support mechanisms could work better for the public while protecting their data. As one of our participants suggests that:

In the ideal world, these big tech companies would have support lines, for you know, all their different user communities in the different languages. If Meta had its own support line in the Persian language, or in the Arabic language, where users could get in touch 24/7, to resolve an issue, or, you know, to get in touch to understand, I mean this is more for like the kind of governance and user level that's, I think that would be an extremely useful instrument.

Overall, our participants suggested that people should be able to negotiate different measures the platforms make about them and their communities. People would also be better informed about the companies' policies but also this would increase their corporate accountability. Other participants argued that there is a need for some kind of accountability for those harmful processes created by big-tech and the results of those processes. As they said, there should be:

mandatory testing and consultation throughout the process of designing, developing technology before it comes to market with human rights, expert civil liberties, experts, you know, community representatives of one of my communities rather than it just being like 'we've got this product, we're gonna ship it'.

Many reflected on the role of government in the lack of robust legislation to protect the citizens. However, this was a controversial issue. Although the role of governments in regulating big-tech was highlighted, the participants were concerned about the controlling power of governments and hesitant about them acting in the name of the citizens. As one of our participants says:

In an ideal world, you would have governments holding tech companies accountable in a way that's accountable to their citizenry, but also attentive globally.

But again, context matters, and not all communities trust governments to act on their behalf and for the wellbeing of their people. As one of our participants says:

I work with the Iranian community, they think these big tech companies are like 50% of the time, they think it's infiltrated by someone from the Islamic Republic who are working against them, or I mean, if you talk to Palestinian communities, they think there's a very big presence and influence by the Israeli government and authorities.

In both cases, though, ensuring the regulation of big-tech was considered vital in balancing power asymmetries, ensuring data justice, and prioritising citizens' digital rights. Some suggested that independent regulators would operate more efficiently than the government. According to them, having external/independent regulators would increase the public's trust. One of our participants compared the need to hold someone accountable for online safety to the reliance we have as a society on public services, and the trust we develop to be able to

I don't know anything about the water that comes out of my tap, right? but I trust it to be clean, and I trust it that there will be people who look after me to make that the case, and I feel like... there ought to be trusted bodies who will take care of us, and the idea that because it's a consumer market largely, we have to do it ourselves is, I think, the reason that nothing ever really changes.

This need for autonomous regulation rather than collaboration with governments and corporations to protect citizens has also been reflected in previous reports, that highlighted a de facto "controlled opposition" when working with governments and private corporations as their incentives and agendas are contradictory to and incompatible with those of the other actors involved (citizens, activists, and NGOs) (Kazansky, et al., 2022: 18). In this context, the 'Rethink data and rebalancing digital power' report by the Ada Lovelace Institute (2022: 22 - 24), recommended the development of a sufficient enforcement response for data protection but also the cooperation among different regulators across local and (inter)national levels.

Even when individuals have gained contextual awareness about potential online harms, they often decide to ignore them. This is due to the complexity of online risks and how to stay protected. Additionally, this means giving up the convenience, easiness, and efficiency of relying on big-tech services. For example, one of the NGO practitioners noted:

So, people don't care about cookies. They just want the thing to go away. People want it to be convenient and free.

Some individuals would stop using specific platforms like Facebook in an effort to control the use of their digital data. However, completely abandoning the use of platforms is inconceivable given the heavy reliance on search engines such as Google or the use of Apple/Android phones due to their wide use. Citizens may ignore the risks and continue using big-tech services having reached a level of resignation and cynicism regarding their digital rights. Part of the problem, as our participants mentioned above, is that citizens are expected to become knowledgeable in different and complex fields. This is not only

an ambitious expectation but also an overwhelming process that may further exacerbate sentiments of fatigue over digital citizenship, as one of our participants argues:

It's like the culture of responsabilising. You're now expected to have media literacy, data literacy, digital literacy, health literacy, financial literacy... There's no safety net of any kind that people can rely on.

Although increasing citizens' responsibilities may seem as improving their control over their digital presence, without the necessary education, tools and support, the power imbalances will be maintained. To change this hierarchy, citizens' organizations can inform, navigate, and help individuals and groups to act against big data corporations and safeguard their rights. Moreover, often digital rights individuals and communities engage with, and educate the public on how to self-protect (Daskal, 2018). As one of our participants argues:

There's no reason we expect the average person, for example, to understand the progress around how do you make deep fakes? But we should understand that if there's starting to be a pervasive phenomenon in a particular country that the media is able to say: well, actually, probably they're not gonna face swap your neighbour, but you know it's not implausible that someone might try and, like, you know, show a video which looks like someone said something they never did, because it's, you know, easier and easier, for example, to, you know, swap the lip movement. So, I think there's also a role for media and us (NGO and citizens' organisations), not as dictating things to citizens, but as a valuable adjunct, particularly when it comes to technology and things that are shifting quite fast.

Apart from civil organisations, the media was mentioned as another important institution that could help raise citizens' awareness about digital harms and risks. This could be part of formal, personal, and folk pedagogies to promote and improve digital literacy but also to democratise the resources and networks that could be used to this end.

4. RESISTANCE POSSIBILITIES

NGO practitioners felt that there are few avenues to challenge big-tech. Often citizens rely on them to destabilise power hierarchies or resolve disputes, as one of our participants argues:

People are really reliant on middle-class NGOs and middle-upper-class lawyers, and these elite practices to try and challenge the tech power. There aren't really accessible routes to challenge tech power.

Others have expressed sentiments of 'powerlessness' about their work in digital rights, mainly focusing on the inefficacies of existing tools and mechanisms to confront big-tech. For example, one of our participants argues that:

I think, to most advocates, and frankly, you know, often feels pretty futile even to a human rights organisation, right? How much influence can you really have? You can have some, but, federal and robust, it's a lot further away.

Despite being pessimistic about data justice in the near future, the participants highlighted the role of using digital media provided by big-tech to challenge their very power. For example, it was noted that vulnerable groups such as young people (specifically women) and LG-BTQI+ communities who are structurally oppressed have been finding ways to talk to each other about mental health, self-harm and anorexia using digital platforms. In this way, people's networks of literacy (Yates & Carmi, 2023) can provide an environment of solidarity and support for those who need it and potentially increase the opportunities to act for their digital rights as a group. After all, the role of digital media has been crucial in social mobilisation as we showed above in the literature (Breindl, 2013), but this time aims to call into question digital rights abuses. As one of our participants argues:

There have been some technical issues with Whatsapp, which has become a really big theme. There have been massive campaigns, especially against Meta and right now against Twitter, because apparently Twitter has suspended a bunch of monarchists accounts, and so there's a lot of campaigning and outcries.

Pressure for social justice can be generated with the use of big-tech

to report issues around power inequalities in the digital landscape and inform/motivate others to react in various practical ways. Using the tools provided by tech companies such as reporting or blocking someone, as our participants argue, are known to citizens and should be used for self-protection of their rights. In many cases, of course, these mechanisms are not sufficient to provide social justice, but there is a need to experience and use evidence to report repeated incidents. The more citizens 'shout about the issues on social media' the faster these issues become visible and experienced and thus expanding (contextual) public awareness and social mobilisation. Although these reactions were described by our participants as more self-protective than mobilising systemic change, they can generate collective forms of resistance through networks of literacy.

Extreme cases of digital rights abuses and threats, such as the premature death of Molly Russell, as our participants pointed out, can promote, pressure, and provoke legal, political, and social changes. Civil organisations' tools, such as the Oversight Board can help citizens and NGO practitioners to work together against big-tech, challenge their power, change and enact specific policies. One of our participants argues that using the Oversight Board in their work to advocate and convince Meta to change their policy was useful. Furthermore, some raised their concern about the overreliance on specific big-tech features and services that give limited options to social actors. For example, one of our participants points out that the over reliance on digital solutions is problematic:

In the ideal world we wouldn't have digital by default for so many things (...) stop making the integration of big tech into day-to-day life the default and make them genuine choices.

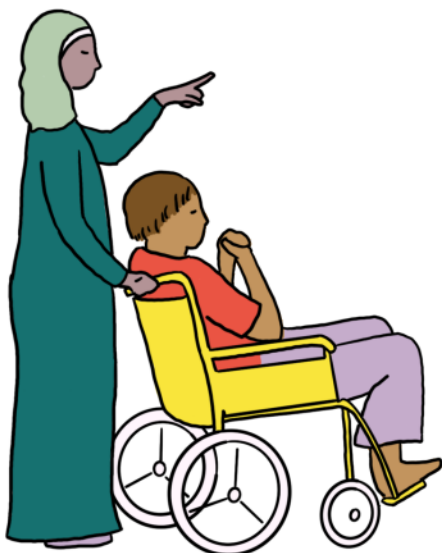
Others, like one of our participants argue that we should think about alternative mechanisms and infrastructures that could react and respond to the harms big-tech create:

I would love there to be alternative tools and infrastructures that Internet users could rely on. Perhaps this might arise out of the consumer movement, or civil society, rather than the regulatory one.

As previous reports have highlighted (NCC, 2022; Ada Lovelace Institute, 2022), there is an increased need for reducing, if not completely removing, industry dependencies and replacing them with new non-commercial institutions. More crucially, new forms of data governance and technology policymaking should incorporate the public's participation through citizens' councils, juries, and collectives' engagement in these processes (Ada Lovelace Institute, 2022: 57 – 71). Other instruments to engage citizens include mini-publics such as town meetings, citizens' assemblies, and consensus conferences, but

also e-democratic processes such as online forums (for example the decidim platform in Spain, Peña-López, 2019), e-surveys and e-polling (Hintz, et al., 2022: 57 – 69). Another suggestion Coldicutt proposed was to use mechanisms that we already have, like Citizens Advice, who help us hold the market accountable.

Although avoiding the use of digital platforms in our everyday life sounds inconceivable, efforts should focus on striking a balance between big-tech and citizens' agency aiming to include or develop alternative tools to suit individual needs and preferences. As 'digital social imaginaries' are conceptualised in the context of data justice and citizens' emancipation and shared widely, people's personal resistance takes the shape of collective opposition and at times of mass campaigning and movements against big tech.



What mobilises people against big data?



Conclusion

- How can citizens be mobilised?

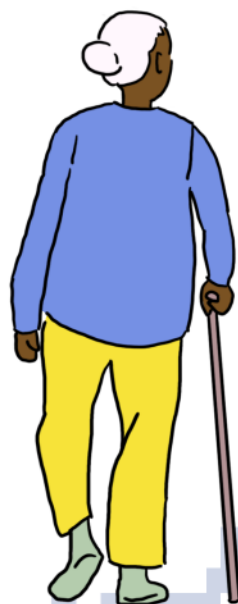
During June 2023, suddenly many people started to tweet about how important it is to read the terms and conditions. The timing was no coincidence – a new season of the tech dystopia television show Black Mirror came back with a new season to Netflix. The first episode "Joan is Awful" showed a young woman who has her life filmed and recreated by AI because she did not read the terms and conditions. In many ways, stories like these help people understand complex digital harms that are hard to explain unless you have experienced them firsthand.

In this report we asked digital rights NGO practitioners about their views on what can people do to negotiate, object and oppose big tech companies. We identified what are possible routes that can enhance citizens' data citizenship, by finding what each actor can or needs to provide:

- 1. Governments** – Robust legislation and enforcement, set up independent regulators, legislate mandatory testing and consultation throughout the process of technology's design and development before it comes to market with human rights, expert civil liberties, community representatives, and providing non-digital options;
- 2. Big-tech** – Providing transparent policies, developing user-friendly policies and support mechanisms, being accountable for harms;
- 3. Media** – Raising awareness and contexts of harms and risks;
- 4. NGOs** – Raising awareness and contexts of harms and risks, developing negotiating power for society;
- 5. Society** – Using existing mechanisms such as Citizens Advice, developing viable alternatives to big-tech, using networks of literacy for data literacy and reporting harms for evidence.

Overall, we saw that everyone feels overwhelmed with what is expected from their part and powerless to make a difference on their own. Often the word 'collaboration' between the different stakeholders is used as a solution, and while we agree to this, there is an assumption that once you informed one side the collaboration is 'over'. Our reading is that a proactive approach from all actors involved as well as their tangible participation and collective mobilisation are necessary to intervene in existing institutional hierarchies and achieve a significant social and political change.

When we asked the participants how an ideal world would look like if they had all the resources possible, many of them found it difficult to imagine such a future and consequently what can be done. We think this is an important insight because if we cannot imagine what we want and how to verbalise it that means we are still operating within the current possibilities without being able to demand the future we want. We find that it is important to imagine and outline what do we think can work better for us. Because once we can think, imagine and verbalise how we want our data-driven future to look like, it will be easier to start pro-actively strategising and working towards it. In this way, we will be able not only to imagine a digital ecosystem that works for citizens, but also to enact it in a way to guarantee data justice and democratic transformation.



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