

Data Narratives Design Lab

Workshop readout



On Thursday 25th May 2023, [CONNECTED BY DATA](#) and [Future Narratives Lab](#) held a narrative design lab workshop, bringing together invited experts to start the co-creation of a strategy for shifting the inaccurate, damaging way data is currently framed & understood in media, policy and industry narratives.

The session followed a process of identifying problems, exploring promising solutions, and identifying opportunities for action. Discussions took place through three distinct tracks focussing on policy and politics, media, and industry.

This document contains a readout of the session.

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Understanding problems and exploring solutions

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Beyond the Exploitation and Protection frames:

Examples of data narratives driving change

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Appendix 1: Attendees

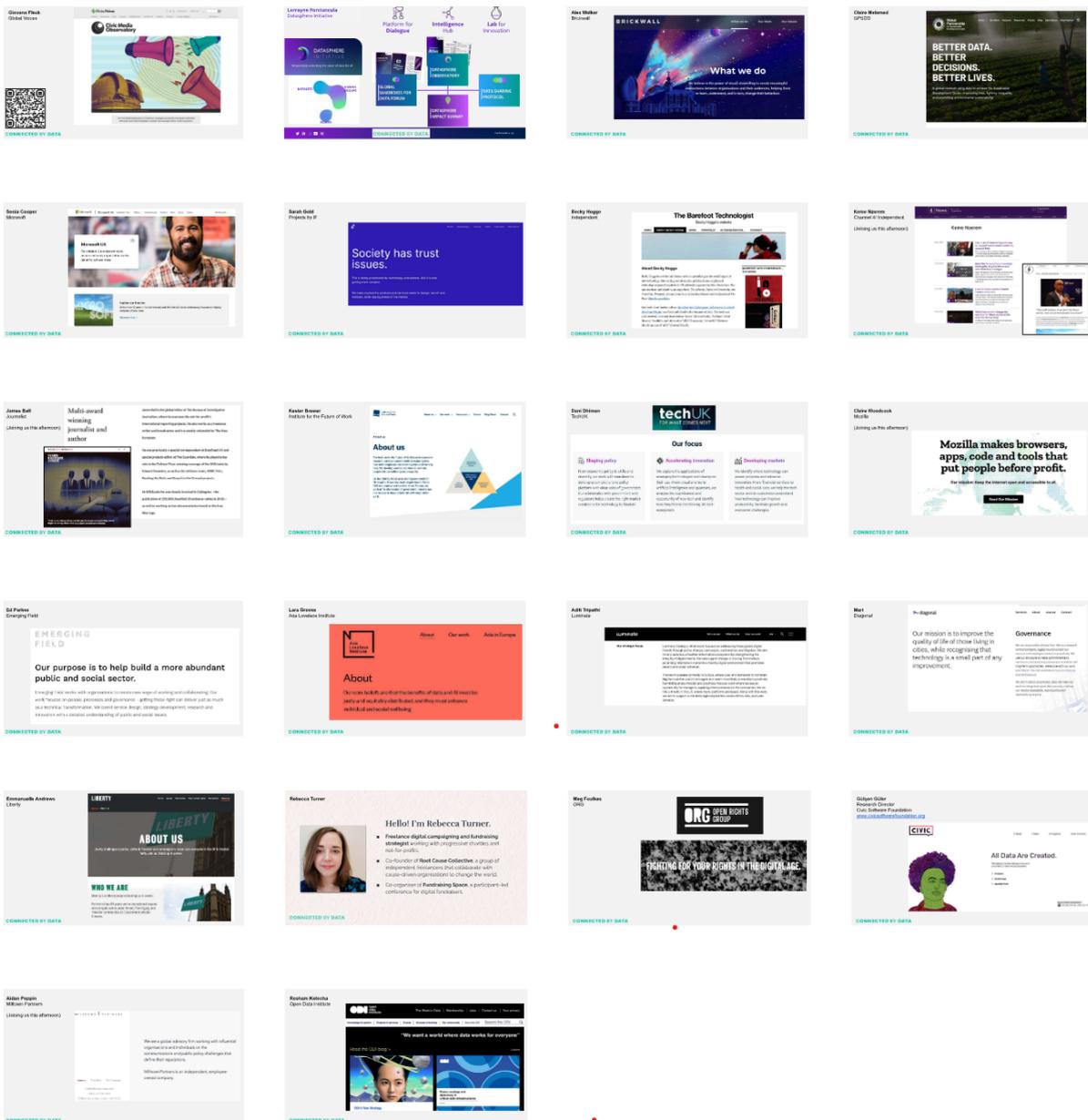
Setting the scene

The session opened with a brief introduction to the work of [CONNECTED BY DATA](#) and [Future Narrative Lab](#) which can be found in the workshop slide deck:

 Narrative Design Lab - May 2023 Workshop .

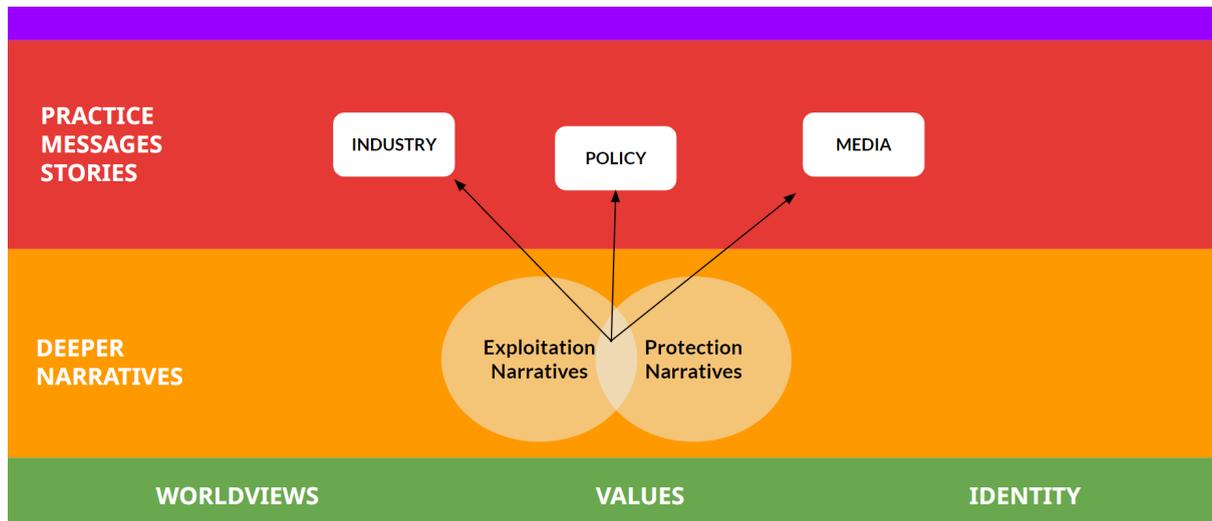
Participants

A full list of participants is in Appendix 1.



Dominant narrative frames

In everyday discourse we discuss different stories and events related to a topic like data, but we base what we are saying on a deeper level of assumptions and stories about how the world works - 'narratives' - which themselves are based on deeper worldviews, values and beliefs.



Based on prior research Dan Stanley (Future Narratives Lab) presented a mapping of existing dominant narratives around data to highlight two key overlapping frames:

- **Protection:** Narratives that frame data as primarily a possession, to be protected from external threats (for example by emphasising personal privacy)
- **Exploitation:** Narratives that frame data as primarily a resource that should be exploited in order to extract value

Dan outlined how, although these two narrative frames are sometimes in conflict they also share some fundamental, and problematic, assumptions. In particular, they present data as fundamentally an individual matter, rather than collective. We hypothesise that the dominance of these framings act as a barrier to increased understanding and uptake of more collective approaches to data governance, including those necessary to tackle community level impacts of data. In addition, these narratives co-exist with a set of related background assumptions about data that serve to disconnect data from its real world impacts, and to make articulating data governance proposals more challenging.

Media, Industry, Policy and Global perspectives

In short introductory presentations, Libby Young outlined research to explore the presence of collective framing in 25 different media stories about data. Recognising that stories are rarely *about* data, and that compelling stories are often focussed on individual ‘actors’, Libby proposed that we sensitise ourselves to ‘relational’ as opposed to ‘collective’ frames. She outlined the ‘third party problem’: stories that involve not just a relationship between two actors, but that have an (often invisible) third party, that gets expressed in the form of ‘the inexplicable decision’ or the ‘data flow monster’.

Libby outlined how most ‘data narratives’ are linked to older kinds of story, and prime particular kinds of policy response.

Data narrative	‘Old’ story	Policy response
Personal data	Surveillance	Data protection
Data breach	Incompetence, theft	Privacy, cyber security
Algorithmic bias	Discrimination	Anti-discrimination laws
Disinformation	Propaganda	Truth-in-advertising laws
Data errors	Cascade events	Liability, compensation

Lorrayne Porcincula outlined the value, and pitfalls, of metaphors used to talk about data, recapping the report [We Need to Talk About Data](#), and highlighting how each commonly used metaphor draws attention to different aspects of data governance, and invokes different existing policy tools. The Datasphere Initiative has responded to the limitation of existing metaphors by developing a new conceptual framework for talking about complex adaptive systems around data, emphasising the interplay of datasets, norms and human groups.

Jonathan Smith shared examples of policy narratives around data and technology, and the increasing blurred lines between technology, data and AI narratives. He identified the link between these narratives and wider policy agendas, exploring:

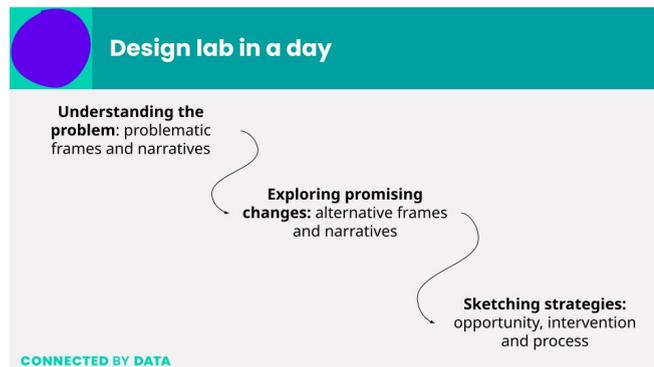
- **Innovation and Growth** - market driven
- **Tech Superpower** - UK winning against global competition
- **Data Futures** - science saving us - health/climate change
- **Efficiency** - more for less, esp. in public services
- **Protection** - particularly children
- **Trust** - believe us it's safe

Giovana Fleck brought a broader global lens to the discussions, sharing a series of examples from [Global Voices' Civic Media Observatory](#) that illustrated how data stories have very different areas of emphasis in, for example, Smart City debates in Zimbabwe (where China's influence is a critical factor in narratives), or in discussions of Brazilian elections and data protection reforms. The importance of understanding the context of narratives was underscored.

Understanding problems and exploring solutions

The workshop split into three breakout discussion groups focussing the following sectors:

- Media
- Policy
- Industry



Through two rounds of discussion each group first explored the problem of dominant narrative frames (using a set of example stories and speeches to ground discussions - see Appendix 2), and then identified potential promising solutions, addressing:

- Responses to the dominant narrative frames (as presented above)
- Other relevant narrative frames
- How these narrative frames result influence different impacts
- Discussing how narrative frames can be shifted and challenged

Each group explored these issues in slightly different ways, reflected in the framing questions for the synthesis of notes below.

Media



In exploring problems of current narratives, the media group identified challenges both with how journalism treats data stories, and with audience reception of stories.

What are the problems with current media narratives around data?

Issues around how journalism treats data stories:

The way stories about data are presented in the media can frequently be problematic in the following ways:

- Stories often **focus on what is happening, but omit the why**. This can mean power is omitted from the narrative. They are also often negative and used as clickbait.

- Stories are often **highly individualised**, seeking to speak to readers about “your data” and missing the collective dimension of data. This misses systemic issues, and nullifies the potential narrative of collective action.

How stories about data are presented in the media is driven by the wider **media industry context**, which is characterised by news cycles, and advertising. This is inherently connected with big tech, and media narratives are often shaped by the tech industry, for example:

- The narrative of binary choice between surveillance and access, i.e. “if you want access to X you need to accept we’ll access Y”.
- The narrative of technological inevitability, e.g. “AI as a hydra” which cannot be tamed, implying harms cannot be avoided.

Issues around audience reception of media stories:

The way audiences respond to data narratives in the media can be problematic, for instance:

- **Data is often not a priority** for people with everyday life concerns where paying bills and immediate survival are top priorities. E.g. People **care about their privacy but are also prepared to forgo it**.
- There are **high levels of individual differences** in people and their perceptions of data issues. Different people have different levels of understanding of data issues, different levels of trust in governments or companies, and different priorities of privacy or safety. News articles are having to try and appeal to a wide range of audiences.

Examples of data narratives driving change

- **Minoritised ethnicities outdoor usage data:** A single data point that only 1% of people in minoritised ethnic groups used national parks in last year, was used by outdoor activity companies (Patagonia etc.) to adjust the targeting of their advertising. This change in narrative happened due to evidence and timing. Connecting with the Black Lives Matter movement provided

pertinent timing, and the objectivity of the data gave credibility to the story telling.

- **Windrush against sewage:** Work done by a retired data scientist resulted in evidence provided to the Environment Agency. This is an example of building awareness in a tangible way on a very local level. This model has since been copied by many local groups, and has now been taken up by the Lib Dems who are making it an election issue. The narrative was effective as it made the issue tangible and localised, making clear the impact on people's lives. The narrative was a form of David and Goliath story, in which a local individual was pitted against an anonymous water company. The narrative of the river can also be seen as analogous for the collectiveness of data.

Where are there promising ways to shift data narratives in the media?

Shifting media narratives may require action to:

- Challenge the premise of the narrative. This requires a tactical shift to change where the emphasis is in stories to raise audience awareness outside of the dominant narratives
- Build towards a critical mass and sustained voice over time.
- Make data relevant to people by actively pointing to the data in all media stories, and explaining how it has been obtained and used.
- Be clear about what change is being campaigned for. Successful narrative changes have been clear on an end goal.

Open questions

The following questions surfaced for further attention when understanding the problem, and developing strategies to shift media narratives around data.

- What key issues are there where stories can demonstrate how data can be used for good?
- How do we balance collective stories, with the need for individual 'hooks'?
- How can media narratives challenge entrenched dichotomies such as privacy versus safety?
- Does cultural and narrative shift only happen with incendiary issues? And as data isn't an incendiary issue, what does this mean for changing data narratives?
- Is climate change a good analogy to data?

Other narrative frames may also be in play within the policy sector, such as:

- **Nationalism** which can be linked to both exploitation and protection, and both authoritarian and democratic content: underlying both data sovereignty models, and arguments about state power and progress in the world realised through data and technology.
- **Unknowability** can be a powerful narrative frame around data, obfuscating practices in a form of ‘mysticism’ and driving deregulation, by allowing/encouraging politicians to cede control over technology to industry ‘experts’.

Furthermore, the group explored the importance of paying attention to:

- The impacts of technology on marginalised groups, who are often a ‘testing ground’ for tech, yet have limited space in mainstream political narratives.
- The capacity of politicians to grasp data issues, due both to being under-resourced, and to the abstract nature of many of these issues (not ‘politicians postbag’ topics).

Examples of data narratives driving change

- **Data Values Project:** Focussed on participation and accountability in language applied to data.
- **Indigenous data sovereignty:** Changing underlying mental models related to data narratives.
- **Institute of the Future of Work Principles (forthcoming):** Principles and values for work that might have broader application.

Where are there promising opportunities to change policy narratives?

Shifts to policy narratives could adopt the following approaches:

- **Focus on government priorities:** meeting the government where they are and emphasising efficiency and improving public services.
- **Re-building old narratives:** leveraging familiar structures and narratives such as the collective power of unions, and surfacing power.
- **Building skills:** improving understanding and unpacking technologies. Funding human capital.
- **Emphasising human-centred narrative frames:** data as made by humans, interrogating who the developers are and who is impacted by their choices.
- **Reframing dominant narratives:** From exploitation (exploit data to extract value) to contribution (data contributes to creation of value).

Industry



The industry breakout explored a range of additional narrative frames employed within industry, as well as a set of levers that might be used to shift industry narratives and practice.

How do dominant narratives operate in industry?

Industry use of language around data is distinctive

The ways data narratives operate in the industry is underpinned by the language they are composed of, and there are important ways this can be different to other sectors, such as:

- **Personal data:** there are blurry boundaries between what regulation this requires and the implications data can have on people (e.g. satellite data)
- **Data stewardship:** connected with the emerging professional space “Chief Data Officers”
- **Democratising data:** providing access beyond the monopoly data holders or even silos within an organisation, to create more value out of it, often meaning sharing within a particular organisation. (Note: the use of ‘democratising’ in this context is quite different from uses in other settings)

Additional narrative frames are prominent in industry contexts

Alongside the *protection* and *exploitation* frames, **costs and benefits** may be the most dominant industry narrative frames, describing how data use accrues cost and adds value.

- Much of the *protection* data narratives fall under “costs” (accountability, compliance, interoperability).
- However, this is **not binary** - compliance is both costly, but also builds trust which adds value. A healthy ecosystem is needed to build value.

Other narrative frames around data within the industry may include **scaleability** and **social responsibility**.

It is also important to note that there are **issues in analysing industry narratives**:

- **“Good” examples are not pure**, as outcomes are always mixed and it is vital to consider who are the people being benefited and harmed.
- Industry examples often include government action / subsidy, and any **dichotomy of “Public = good, private = bad” is too simplistic**.
- **The narrative of “progress” is highly problematic**, as this assumes poor practices from the past will not resurface in the future (but they can and do).

Examples of data narratives driving change

- **Aadhaar, India:** Small businesses being able to accept payments through data-enabled payment systems during Covid, introducing a new power dynamic. |
- **Indigenous startups & knowledge:** Examples include groups refusing existing labelled data, but rather creating their own datasets. Examples also include collaborations with government and industry, using indigenous knowledge to effect positive outcomes.
- **Collective (altruistic) data sharing:** Citizen Science projects, and genomics projects such as Our Future Health, demonstrate people’s willingness to share data and benefit from doing so.

- **Data commons and digital public infrastructures:** can be used for example to share data using cryptography to enable access to aggregated calculations without having to expose data, in secure data spaces.

Where are there promising directions for shifting industry narratives?

The group explored a number of mechanisms for change, including:

- **Workforce power:** Tech company workers who do not feel they can contribute to good are unlikely to stay at a company, causing pressure to attract talent through ethical practices. However pressure from the workforce for change can get stuck at executive level, and tech worker layoffs may have a chilling effect on worker action.
- **Public awareness cases pushing change:** cases with high public awareness such as messaging service encryption, or social media use by young people, can result in strong pushes for change.
- **Direct communication between company and user:** can help refine market USP and identify what gives competitive advantage, while helping design to do less harm.
- **Framing as datasphere:** not just individualised data, but a new space with complex relationships between data, human groups and norms (technical / political) - complex adaptive systems, micro behaviours that affect macro behaviours.

Synthesis

Drawing on the discussions reported above, and following the workshop, Future Narratives Lab produced the following synthesis:

Current narrative	What's wrong	An alternative
Data is mysterious and unknowable to most people, the domain only of expert technologists	Precludes any idea that normal people should have a say or influence over data and how it is managed	Data is our hidden collective power - ordinary people can use it to work together to achieve our common goals
Data is either a private individual possession, or it belongs to noone (and therefore can be claimed by whoever 'finds' it)	Where people don't actively claim or protect their data, it legitimises exploitation of that data for profit, with no recompense, by the market	Most data is created through our relationships, and belongs to us in common. If this data is used, it needs to be with our collective permission
Data is an insubstantial and abstract thing, that exists in a digital space, separate from the real world	Takes attention away from the real material impacts that data and its current use and processes have in the real world	Data use is an industrial process, using energy and water, and causing pollution. Those who make profits should pay the costs
When thinking about data, most people's concern should be making sure they protect their own data from outside threats	Implies data is always personal, when it is often relational, puts responsibility on the individual, and undermines the possibility of collective responses and approaches	We can't fix big problems with data and technology through acting on our own. We need to work together to create collective solutions and approaches
Countries all over the world are now in a race over who can best exploit their data resources	Presents national exploitation as a zero sum game, regulation as an impediment, and undermines the idea of international cooperation	Countries across the world face very similar challenges and opportunities with data. If we work together, we can all benefit
Problems with data and technology are mainly big societal questions about the future of our economy and democracy	Takes attention away from the specific practical impact that data usage is having now, particularly on marginalised groups	If you don't see the impact of a datafied society on your life everyday, it is a clear sign of wealth and privilege. Those with the least are most affected right now

Strategies for action

The closing section of the workshop included a plenary brainstorm of potential next step actions. Through table-based discussions, groups identified a set of priorities to explore, including:

Education & training

- Data rights and data literacy training
 - at all levels of curriculum
 - in professional settings
 - for different demographics
- Organising skills meets: data skills around specific justice issues
- Sandboxes to expose people to issues

Research

- Finding out how people think / speak about data and its impact, including narratives that people are most aware of
 - include young people, and elderly
 - Include marginalised and impacted groups
- Big citizen's jury to set the agenda, get coverage
- Citizen science initiative

Creating resources

- Visualisations & visual libraries
- Guidance on how to better depict data
- Publications appealing to different audiences: e.g. "data comedy", children's books, a "data amnesty" highlighting how bad we are at managing our data, etc.
- Tools for social justice campaigners
- A 'Fair Data Mark'
- Data reporting guidelines (akin to Samaritans' guidance on reporting suicide) explaining how to avoid harm
- Resource for issue-based campaigns on where to look for issues of concern re/: data - and tools (e.g. FOI, GDPR) they can use

Coalition building and catalysing action

- Working to bring together interest and industry groups for more sustainable uses of data
- Connecting data protection and social justice campaigners to help build movements
- Small grants for community based investigatory reporting / funding ops

Next steps

An evaluation form has been sent to attendees to identify interest in future activities.

CONNECTED BY DATA and Future Narrative Lab will work together to identify paths to support some of the activities above, and, based on feedback, will seek to convene further conversations to advance work shifting data narratives.

Appendix 1: Attendees

Name	Organisation
Adam Cantwell-Corn	Connected by Data
Aditi Tripathi	Luminate
Aidan Peppin	Milltown Partners
Alex Walker	Brickwall Film
Becky Hogge	Independent
Claire Melamed	Global Partnership on Sustainable Development Data
Claire Woodcock	Mozilla Corporation
Daniel Stanley	Future Narratives Lab
Ed Parkes	Emerging Field
Emily Macaulay	Connected by Data
Emmanuelle Andrews	Liberty
Giovana Fleck	Global Voices
Gulsen Guler	Civic Team
Helena Hollis	Connected by Data
Jeni Tennison	Connected by Data
Jonathan Smith	Connected by Data
Keme Nzerem	Journalist
Kester Brewer	Institute for the Future of Work
Lara Groves	Ada Lovelace Institute
Libby Young	Connected By Data / ADM+S
Lorraine Porciuncula	Datasphere Initiative
Mari	Diagonal
Meg Foulkes	Open Rights Group
Nanie de Castro	Future Narratives Lab
Rebecca Turner	Freelance Digital Campaigns Consultant
Resham Kotecha	Open Data Institute
Sarah Gold	Projects by IF
Sonia Cooper	Microsoft
Tim Davies	Connected by Data

Appendix 2: Source materials

The following stories and articles were used as stimulus materials for the first workshop activities.

- **Media 1:** [My Students Are Using Ai To Cheat. Here's Why It's A Teachable Moment](#) | Siva Vaidhyanathan | The Guardian
- **Media 2:** [Data Brokers Are Now Selling Your Mental Health Status](#) | Drew Harwell | Washington Post
- **Media 3:** [Brazil: Online Learning Tools Harvest Children's Data](#) | Human Rights Watch
- **Media 4:** [How To Ask Openai For Your Personal Data To Be Deleted Or Not Used To Train Its Ais](#) | TechCrunch | Natasha Lomas
- **Media 5:** [Cops Are Getting A New Tool For Family-tree Sleuthing](#) | Wired | Megan Molteni (Abridged)
- **Media 6:** [Drivers In Europe Net Big Data Rights Win Against Uber And Ola](#) | | TechCrunch | Natasha Lomas (Abridged)
- **Industry 1:** [Planet seeks partners that can extract more value from data](#) | Sandra Erwin | Space News
- **Industry 2:** [Cambridge-based Attention Exchange reasserts the value of your data – by getting advertisers to pay you for it](#) | Mike Scialom | Cambridge Independent
- **Industry 3:** [Data as an asset: AI puts the focus back on value](#) | The Stack
- **Industry 4:** [Data To Value: How A Democratized Data Approach Benefits Businesses](#) | Harikishore Sreenivasalu | Forbes
- **Industry 5:** [We've Heard the Future of Music. So Far, It Sounds Terrible](#) | Ethan Millman | Rolling Stone
- **Industry 6:** ['Huge mess of theft and fraud:' artists sound alarm as NFT crime proliferates](#) | Lois Beckett | The Guardian
- **Politics 1:** [British Businesses to Save Billions Under New UK Version of GDPR](#) | Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and The Rt Hon Michelle Donelan MP
- **Politics 2:** [Health and Social Care Secretary speech to Policy Exchange](#) | Department of Health and Social Care and The Rt Hon Sajid Javid MP
- **Politics 3:** [Technology is changing how we monitor, understand and respond to conflict and to humanitarian crises](#) | Statement by Ambassador James Roscoe at the UN Security Council briefing on Technology and Peace and Security
- **Politics 4:** [Chinese State Surveillance](#) | Meeting of the Scottish Parliament
- **Politics 5:** [Data Protection and Digital Information \(No. 2\) Bill](#) | The Minister for Data and Digital Infrastructure (Julia Lopez)
- **Politics 6:** [Britain's Labour Party used to hate Big Tech. Not any more](#) | ANNABELLE DICKSON | Politico

