

Data Cooperativism

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ABSTRACT

In the age of surveillance capitalism, data are capital. Platforms accumulate enormous amount of user data that they can later use for their own benefit (which they currently use for advertising purposes or governmental surveillance). Exploitation of the user data is at the center of this business model. The purpose of this submission is to provide alternative imaginations that challenge the illusion of data surveillance and data capitalism as the only alternative way to approach the data. What if data can be considered collective property rather than a source of capital? This submission digs into the concept of data cooperativism focusing on different dimensions of cooperativism, infrastructures, relationships between the cooperative members, ways of governance and associated challenges.

Keywords

data, cooperativism, surveillance, data justice

CSS Concepts

• Human-centered computing~Virtual reality

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INTRODUCTION

Almost by default data collection implies the existence of skewed power relationships. Long before mass digitalisation, data in the form of maps, statistical entries, or ethnographic notes were produced by those in position of power to order and conquer the local knowledge of those with less power [1]. Even without sophisticated technology, data have been produced by the powerful to enforce standardization and control [2]. With the spread of technology, the hierarchical relationships have become omnipresent leading to what Sosana Zuboff have called the surveillance capitalism [3]. The proliferation of data and ‘the cloud’ has turned the relationships of control to be omnipresent, and data has become the main form of capital – platform capitalism based on controlling immense amount of data has made a platform a new central business model [4].

At the same time, there are technological alternatives to the model of surveillance capitalism, engineers and designers provide alternative ways of approaching data such as Data Justice [5], Data Feminism [6] or Disobedient Technology [7]. There are alternatives to data surveillance – technologies that are based with the idea to provide alternative values, granting users control and security over the way their data are used such as for example feminist menstruation tracking apps like Drip [8].

I join the mentioned above initiatives in the intention developing alternatives to data surveillance and discuss

the concept of data cooperativism as alternative to data capitalism. I am going to outline different dimensions important for data cooperativism and focus on social relations related to the practices of data cooperativism. I believe that relational aspects of technology (the way people interact with each other and the user on the technology production site) are as relevant and inseparable from technological aspect of data production and storage. How much horizontality is possible if there is always will be a difference between a user and a technologist? I am interested in the overlaps (and impossibility to distinguish) between social and technical. I use design fiction to generate questions and poke out imagination to thing how data relations can look otherwise and which difficulties will arise if we start thinking outside the limits of data capitalism. What if not surveillance and data capitalism?

Provocations

Dear Shareholder,

We hereby confirm that due to the amount of attention we received from you over the last month, we increased your stock share in our company to a 0.0005%. We are happy to announce that with this upgrade, your level of access has been promoted to GREEN. That means that you got access to our stakeholders meetings and should attend our roundtables as well as the general assembly meeting of the stakeholders.

We are happy to announce that the code you uploaded into your open GTHB account during the years of 2005 - 2010 was displayed in the outcomes of our TTT model 1050101010 times over the past two months. That made your shares in the DATA Cooperative increase to 0.004% granting you blue level of access.

They wanted me to attend this meeting of the platform board again. I had to go there after work, I was so tired and exhausted that I felt asleep right at the meeting. I was waken up by screams. some people were arguing with the tech people cause they were frustrated about the developers not being able to explain what this whole budgeting thing was about.

What if not shares?

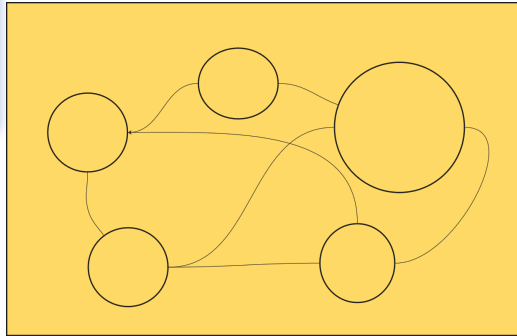
Traditional methods of data collection imply that there is one center, one owner of the data collection center and perhaps one owner of the infrastructure. The model of cooperativism implies that all participants contributing data into the system in exchange receive some ownership and control over the system. While in theory the concept of horizontal participation is not problematic, it does raise practical questions around coordination.

- Who owns the infrastructure?
- How much of technical competency do the users share?
- How much time should users spend to participate?

While the ideas of distributing ownership over the data and the system that collects and manages data through shares and stakes can seem obvious, it is not entirely clear how exactly should we envision

cooperation between the owners of the infrastructure, developers of the system, and those who within a standard model of data capitalism would be called users?

THE PROBLEMS WITH HORIZONTALITY



Although the idea of data cooperativism may be appealing, the Ada Lovelace Institute's report [8] on Alternative Data Stewardship provides that there are several major problems with cooperatives:

- Financial sustainability and scale – how do cooperatives survive the competition with commercial models?
- Involvement and inclusion -- who to include and how to ensure that they can participate in the decision-making in a meaningful way?

At the end of the day, the questions around data cooperativisms and how it should be organized are similar to organizing participatory design and co-design projects as well as peer-to-peer exchange platforms [9].

One of the important aspects here, as pointed by Lampinen in her study of peer-to-peer exchange platforms, is establishing trust in non-monetary daily interactions between strangers. While money and anonymity can be ideologically problematic concepts for some people, they also provide a well-established models of interaction between strangers in our society.

If monetary top-down modes of interaction patterns are gone, people have to reinvent the models of interaction between each other all over again, which can be tiring and demanding.

Research questions for exploratory studies

Keeping in mind that complete horizontality is not likely possible in data cooperativism, I would like to raise and discuss the following questions during the workshop:

What are communication practices used by existing data cooperatives? Which challenges do they face trying to develop alternative approaches to power distribution?

How can we design alternative power relationships with 'the users'? And which concepts can serve instead the idea of a user as a passive object of data harvest?

How to deal with differences in technical competency between people and different level of desired engagement? What limitations to equality are imposed by the control over technology?

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