16. Big Data and the Global South

A Case for Dialogue

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Abstract
This contribution identifies and critiques the role that dialogue could play as an important tool in bridging the gap between Northern and Southern imaginaries, perceptions and realities on the presence of data mining corporates in Africa, Latin America, the Arab World, Asia and other regions of the world that do not associate themselves with the highly industrialized West. Coming at a time when cynicism over the presence of Silicon Valley and other major data players in Africa and other non-Western regions of the world has been growing, a stakeholders' dialogue to openly discuss and conscientize all parties on how and why the presence of these major tech players may be deemed unwelcome by locals and other observers.

Keywords: Global South, dialogue, data, inequalities, technology

The data revolution, which has largely been restricted to the industrialized countries, is starting to find its way into the so-called developing world market. For example, several cities across the Global South are adopting the "smart city" concept, which is centered on the use of large-scale data analytics with the aim of improving quality-of-life standards while also achieving sustainable development. The South African city of Cape Town has gone a step further, adopting big data solutions to boost its wildfire assessment and emergency response systems. Confronted by a burdensome emerging techno-economic culture, which is enabling datafication (Schäfer and van Es 2017), surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2018) and data colonialism (Couldry and Mejias 2019), we need cool heads and strong leadership. We need to realize how much we can achieve by listening to each other.

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Dialogue should be initiated to understand the disparities. There are no quick solutions, but dialogue is a good way to start.

The purpose of this essay is to make a case for dialogue as a way forward in identifying workable ways to deal with global challenges emerging from long-standing economic and social disparities necessitated by persistent technological developments, including big data. The term "Global South" has steered a significant amount of debate in some academic quarters. I do not intend to go into this debate, because, for me, "Global South" is not about geographical determinism but is instead taking a cue from Mahler (2017; 2018). I see it as a concept that represents determination and solidarity among previously dominated groups to scale up efforts to earn social and political agency recognizing their shared struggles, knowledge, and independence. Equally, there is plenty of debate on how such an objective can be achieved and that's where dialogue comes in handy. In an era in which calls for decolonizing everything, including data (see Quinless 2022), are scattered everywhere in academia, deciding how it can be done is no easy task. If you ask me, that's where the idea of dialogue reigns supreme. A white colleague and friend who teaches African history was attacked by students at a Dutch university, because students were adamant a "white man should not teach African history." When I invited a white friend to a panel on "decolonizing technologies in Africa," a colleague demanded answers, asking me to "decolonize" by choosing from a pool of Black academics instead. These examples more or less explain why I have chosen to be a flagbearer of dialogue. Dialogue to me simply means having a conversation. It means that, despite how gifted or assured you are about your cause or idea, you need to listen to others. That sounds very idealistic. Maybe. But if you spend some time working in conflict-marred societies like myself, perhaps you understand why dialogue is crucial.

One recurring argument I have heard each time I talk about dialogue is that it does not always guarantee meaningful change. I always teasingly reply by saying: neither do violence or hate. The point is that there are academics and activists who do not seem to see the irony of using racism to fight racism by thinking that the best way to correct historical injustices is by seeing everything in terms of color. Hate cannot heal hate. Indeed, it takes time to achieve meaningful change. Sometimes absolute change is impossible to achieve. South Africa is the (relatively) peaceful nation it is today because of the Truth of Reconciliation Commission (TRC) introduced by Nelson Mandela in 1995. Of course, there will always be people who feel that perpetrators of violence did not deserve amnesty for the violations they committed during the apartheid era, but sometimes you need to make

brave and difficult decisions for the sake of progress. The TRC represents how much dialogue, regardless of circumstances, can achieve. By proposing dialogue, I am not in any way claiming that other measures, some of them quite radical, should be discounted. I am simply proposing something that is supported by my inherent belief that, when people listen to each other, there is so much that can be achieved. The remainder of this piece will discuss the state of affairs regarding datafication and data practices in the Global South, including the opportunities and challenges that the Global South faces and how dialogue may aid in (the equity of) these developments.

Opportunities and Challenges

Concepts such as "big data for development" are hogging the limelight, particularly in non-Western societies where policymakers are debating ways through which big data could help identify, gain, and deepen a better understanding of global development and humanitarian challenges. This way, it is hoped that the open data movement could play a decisive role in ensuring poorer nations' determination to meet the UN's Sustainable Development Goals by the 2030 deadline. The major problem, as highlighted by Cohen and Kharas (2018), is that finding top-notch, timely, easily accessible data comes at a cost in most poorer countries, which are nevertheless considered the main targets for Western developmental endeavors. This notable challenge hasn't stopped the massive private and public sector investments in big data and other technologies across the Global South. Despite its corporate connections, studies have shown big data could help improve social change in poorer countries (Bellagio 2014). More recent studies have, however, criticized such notions. For example, Brevini (2021) argues that many countries in the Global South should not embrace artificial intelligence and big data due to environmental concerns, as judiciously elaborated in her latest book.

Data concerns do not end there. There are a host of challenges that need to be unpacked if we are to see the real potential of big data in developing markets. These range from poor connectivity trends (Mutsvairo 2019) to privacy and ethical concerns (Simo 2015) regarding the possible abuse of people's data. While China's Huawei is a dominant force in the African telecommunications sector, its big-scale investments in big data and surveillance technologies across the continent is worrying activists, who fear autocratic regimes will target them to dissuade dissent. The Chinese government makes no apology for its expanding investments in datafied

technologies. Thanks to big data, high school students' behavior is monitored in class (Chan 2018), while a controversially intrusive credit-score ranking system (Campbell 2019) is taking shape in the Asian giant of over 1 billion people. From this standpoint, it is clear there is an urgent need to broadly promote transnational discussions and dialogues on data-related issues so that monopolization and accountability issues can be prioritized. Many of the aforementioned societies are extremely unequal, which has led to fears that the presence of, or investments in, big data could further perpetuate the stridently growing inequalities.

Simultaneously, the number of universities in the Global South offering postgraduate degrees in data science, big data, or business analytics has increased over the last five to ten years. These include the Asian Institute of Management in the Philippines, Goa Institute of Management in India, the University of Malaya in Malaysia, Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University in Saudi Arabia, Covenant University in Nigeria, University of Pretoria in South Africa, Egade Business School in Mexico, among several others. Deeper partnerships with institutions in the Global North could stimulate knowledge on different data cultures among institutions and countries, possibly leading to equitable benefits from intricate advances in technology.

Ways Forward

Dialogue is the best way forward, because data actors including academics working in this sub-field have plenty to benefit from by listening to each other. Why would an edited book collection claiming to uncover global trends on data or technology only cover those from Europe and North America, for example? It points to the missing dialogue between scholars working in different regions of the world. Dialogue seems to be missing among private sector and governmental actors, too. Consider the fact that some of the countries that are being considered prime destinations of big data investments do not even have the requisite infrastructures conducive for such technocentric innovation. Some of these countries are even struggling to feed their own citizens, yet they seem to see it fit to receive data investments. Their priority should be on providing food, and if big data could help in that endeavor, then it should surely be promoted. Not to be outdone is certainly the lack of data science and other data-related training across the Global South. Only a few institutions of higher learning, some of which have been identified in this piece, are offering

university-level education on data related issues. It is important to invest in educating the local population first if long-term attributes of big data are to be comprehended, as the importance of homegrown skilled labor cannot be underestimated.

The London School of Economics' (LSE) joint MA in Global Media and Communications with the University of Cape Town is an example of how universities located in different economic regions of the world could collaborate and promote sustainable dialogue on matters related to our field. As tomorrow's leaders, students enrolled on such programs will certainly continue to question why engineers rush to develop new technologies before ensuring that the societal problems presented by old and current technologies, including the digital divide and digital inequalities, are stridently dealt with. We cannot expect societies to become equal tomorrow. They will probably never become completely equal. But the enormity of the challenges technology poses requires a collective approach, and that's where dialogue matters. If we want to have affordable and accessible internet in poor nations, we need to sit together and have a conversation on how that can be achieved. If data can transform societies, it is important to underscore its relevance to the common man and woman, and it only takes a conversation to see how that endeavor can be achieved.

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