

# DATA & SOCIETY

Organizational Strategy



# Technology & Power

2024 marked Data & Society's ten-year anniversary. During our first decade, the organization grew from a vibrant research community into a research and policy anchor for the vital field of technology, society, and justice. And we've expanded our goals, from creating a more nuanced evidence base for technology's impacts on society to using that information to engage policymakers on human-centered, equitable approaches to governing how new technologies come into our lives.

In 2025, the stakes are higher than ever, as we face starkly opposing visions of our shared future. While American democracy is defined by pluralism, equity, the pursuit of knowledge, and the rule of law, we are confronting the real possibility of a technology-dominant system upholding the extreme accumulation of power and privilege, and reshaping public institutions to serve private interests. An unchecked tech industry exerts power over people's lives and opportunities, wielding outsized influence not only over the fundamental direction of innovation in our society, but also over state power, democratic practice, and social norms.

Our work seeks to illuminate and challenge this power dynamic, and to reorient the relationship between people and technology. We do this by building a rigorous evidence base of technology's impacts on society, and designing policy interventions to foreground that evidence for policymakers. In the coming years, we will also focus on what we see as the next stage of our work: using those tools — and engaging Data & Society's broad and growing network — to build power toward social, economic, and environmental justice.

## A Future Where People

## Come Before Technology

**We are working to build a future where technology is governed in the public interest and used to support people and communities, rather than driving surveillance, control, and oppression. To do this, we need to better understand and use levers of power. This is our north star.**

Our position is neither anti-tech nor anti-innovation. To the contrary, we believe some — not all — technologies have great potential to benefit people, and that continued innovation is critical to achieving those benefits. But technological innovation must not come at the expense of people and communities. It should serve the public.

# Our Goals

## Foundational Research

Integrate sociotechnical research into structural fights for equity.

We foreground questions about power and justice in our research, centering people on the margins. To challenge simplistic narratives about technology and its effects on society, we prioritize grounded research in the field.



## Policy Blueprints

Ground policy in research and enable interdisciplinary coalitions.

We champion evidence-based policy that reflects the lived realities of impacted communities, supporting experts and emerging leaders to root technology governance in research, public participation, and accountability.



## Counternarratives

Tell compelling stories that challenge technocentric hype and point to new ways to imagine our shared futures.

We challenge the idea that tech dominance is inevitable and that technology is always the best solution, lifting up voices and narratives that offer bold alternative visions, prioritize the public interest, and situate technologies within the broader structures and systems they operate in.



## Network Power

Engage a diverse, committed community to build collective power for tech justice and drive structural change.

We turn shared learning into action, bringing together a wide network of individuals, organizations, donors, community groups, and policymakers united by the belief that technology's impact on society is not just a concern for researchers or tech experts, but a collective responsibility.



Our challenge is not only to meet our goals, but to actively explore how these four elements work together to shift power — away from the tech industry, tech oligarchs, and an increasingly uncertain political environment, and toward communities, movements, and institutions who see ungoverned technology as a threat to their rights, freedoms, and livelihoods. To do that, in the next one to two years, Data & Society will explore and pilot projects that build pathways to action and power within our growing network. While we can act as a catalyst and collaborator, the urgency of this moment demands the kind of effort and influence that can only happen in deep coalition with our growing community. Together, we work toward a future where technology is shaped by democratic values, human rights, and the public interest — a future that upholds human creativity, dignity, and opportunity.

## Our Priorities

The following thematic priorities shape our research focus, enable collaborations across our programs, and articulate shared objectives to help advance our goals and drive impact. While intentionally expansive, these priorities are not abstract; our research is anchored in specific, real-world domains and grounded in the lived experiences of affected communities. This framework supports both depth and adaptability, particularly at times of heightened uncertainty. It also guides how we engage with partners and communities, ensuring that our research and policy work remains relevant, rigorous, and responsive.

### Democracy in the Age of AI

Artificial intelligence and automation pose profound challenges for democratic systems and governance, as these technologies undermine the integrity of information ecosystems and reshape essential institutions including journalism, academia, scientific research, and government. Tech and government leaders alike often champion AI as a tool to maintain US hegemony, improve worker output, and increase “efficiency,” while industry leaders shape tech policy and export Silicon Valley norms and values through their products. In a political climate of escalating authoritarian impulses, the use of AI systems and underlying data infrastructures are contributing to democratic backsliding and the rise of illiberalism.

In partnership with policymakers, civil servants, activists, and journalists, our research will analyze how AI challenges the authenticity of information and diminishes trust in the institutions that produce it. We will examine how AI impacts scientific practice and knowledge production and investigate how it is used to make decisions across sectors in ways that obscure accountability. We will provide empirical evidence that supports the development and amplification of narratives that counter the tech industry’s own, as we reveal how industry dominance threatens to entrench inequality and concentrate power, jeopardizing civil liberties and the project

of social reform. Through global networks and local practices, we aim to explore what democratic futures become possible when robust and human-centric governance of data and technology is the norm, rather than the exception.

#### THIS WORK INCLUDES:

- A series of policy briefs and related programming illuminating **myths that are fueling a wide-scale deployment of unchecked, unaccountable AI**, and challenging those myths with empirical evidence.
- **Ongoing work addressing the current gap in support for state-level policy makers and leaders, and ensuring that tech governance** succeeds in local-level implementation, not only in legislative debates.
- Research looking at how **information integrity and research is being impacted by the rise of artificial intelligence** and what the future of scientific knowledge production holds for democracy.

## Worker Power and Collective Rights

The political economy of technology is defined by the centralization of power and is intensified by the industry's increasing alignment with anti-democratic actors. Growing demands for public participation in tech governance under these conditions is contested and remains a site for ongoing experiments and resistance, raising deeper questions about how to shift power so that workers and communities can shape the systems that impact their lives.

In solidarity with community groups, activists, and workers who are building alternatives — from reclaiming data rights to deploying community benefit agreements — we draw on our longstanding labor research and the study of participatory methods to map the conditions for redistributing power and support interdisciplinary coalitions working toward collective rights and democratic governance.

### THIS WORK INCLUDES:

- Research interventions into **collective privacy and rights**, including explorations of how changing privacy impacts worker power, how the privacy harms wrought by AI and other algorithmic systems are experienced at a collective level, and how issues of reproductive privacy impact patients and health infrastructures.
- Building a **cross-sector analytical framework for understanding generative AI's impact on labor** in partnership with labor unions, worker rights organizations, and workers.
- Working with **city governments and community-based organizations to assess AI impact**, and leading critical AI education for public sector workers.

## Technology's Impacts on People and Climate

The climate crisis requires immediate action and a shift away from fossil fuels — yet technologies like generative AI, with their significant energy demands, may exacerbate global emissions and environmental inequities. There is an urgent need to establish a broad understanding of the ecological and social impacts of AI systems and to make the embodied, material consequences of data-centric technologies and the infrastructures that power them more visceral to policymakers.

Our research examines the various ways communities negotiate the relationship between technology and climate, and centers the needs and perspectives of impacted groups in the environmental assessments of technological innovations. We aim to create a body of empirical research to inform policies — from the local to transnational levels — on the growing investments in AI infrastructure and the circular economies of technology reuse, and to highlight the tensions between community-driven climate solutions and industry-led approaches.

### THIS WORK INCLUDES:

- Establishing a broad understanding — grounded in participatory methodologies — of the **ecological and social impacts of AI systems**, as expressed by the communities at risk of greatest harm.
- Research examining the collision of **AI-driven prediction and the lived realities of wildfire in California**, examining how technocratic power, market logics, and community resilience shape the fight for a just and democratic climate future.
- An ethnographic study examining the social, economic, and industrial changes unfolding in **rural Pennsylvania in light of the tech industry's broad investment in AI infrastructure there**.

## Equity as an Organizing Principle

At Data & Society, equity is both an enduring commitment and an organizing principle that shapes every aspect of our work — from internal policies and research methodologies to how we engage with research participants, communities, and partners. It guides us in challenging power asymmetries and ensuring our work serves those most impacted by data-centric technologies.

Equity is an iterative and ongoing practice. Escalating attacks on academic inquiry and inclusion only clarify the necessity of our commitment. As a research institution, network, and workplace, we pursue change at the interpersonal, organizational, and systemic levels. This vision drives both our long-term ambitions and concrete actions — building a more inclusive workplace and field of public interest technology that advances collective power.

### THIS WORK INCLUDES:

- A **field archive of sociotechnical knowledge** drawing on our own work, as well as that of experts from across domains, regions, and points of view, especially those outside of traditional centers of knowledge production.
- **Training and partnerships with journalists** so they can tell cohesive stories that articulate why good technology governance also fosters a robust and competitive innovation environment, and connect the dots between the value of open-source AI and anti-monopoly actions.
- Ongoing work leading the Labor, Race, and Tech working group, an interdisciplinary scholarly network that convenes members across labor and racial justice organizations to **examine labor issues using a racial justice lens**.

# DATA & SOCIETY

## Who We Are

Data & Society is an independent nonprofit research and policy institute. We study the social, political, and economic implications of data-centric technologies, automation, and AI, and use that knowledge to inform and shape policy from the ground up.

For ten years, our work has offered evidence to counter the idea that technology alone can solve intractable problems like poverty and inequality. We know that innovative technologies can benefit society, but can also be abused to invade privacy, enable new forms of discrimination, foreclose opportunity, and harm individuals and communities. That's why we're working toward a future where people, not technology, come first.

Our work deliberately centers people, communities, and the environment over technological determinism. We bring together researchers, community advocates, and policymakers to shape technology governance in ways that advance equity, justice, and democracy. Together with our network, we drive the change needed for a more inclusive and accountable technological future.

We are tremendously grateful to our funders and partners, who share our commitment to a future where technology is guided by the public interest, and who provide vital support for this work.