ANNUAL REPORT

2025

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ABOUT DATA & SOCIETY

Data & Society is an independent nonprofit research and policy organization. We believe that empirical evidence should directly inform the development and governance of new technologies — and that these technologies can and must be grounded in equity, rights protections, and human dignity. Recognizing that the concentrated, profit-driven power of corporations and tech platforms will not steer us toward a just future, our work foregrounds the perspective and agency of people and communities most impacted by technological change.

We study the social implications of data, automation, and AI, producing original research to ground informed public debate about emerging technologies. We offer empirical evidence to counter the notion that technology is the best or only solution to the host of societal challenges we face, and our communications, policy, and engagement work applies and amplifies those findings.
In all our work, we collaborate with a growing, international network to explore the far-reaching ways that data-centric and automated technologies are shaping lives and opportunities.

This report presents an overview of institutional highlights from 2025.

LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear friends,

AI is reshaping work, communities, and public life at a scale and speed that outpaces most people's ability to respond. At Data & Society, we believe that the gap — between tech industry power and public power — is the defining challenge of this moment. Through research, policy, and public engagement, our work in 2025 focused on closing that gap. Last year, we:

Challenged industry narratives.
Through our *Myths of AI* policy briefs and congressional testimony, we pushed back on the claim that AI's expansion is beyond democratic influence — and worked with state leaders in Colorado and California to assess where AI adoption helps communities and where it harms them.

Grounded AI in lived experience.
Our researchers worked directly with communities in Atlanta, western Pennsylvania, Virginia, and California to document how AI is reshaping work, mental health, and the environment. Too much of what passes for AI's societal impact comes from hype and industry PR; we believe rigorous social science is the corrective.

Created space for unpacking public agency.
We partnered with the New York Public Library on a four-part "Understanding AI" series that drew thousands of participants into public conversation about AI — providing a public interest space to counter the tech industry's narrative monopoly.

In everything we do, the push for accountability continues to be front and center. In 2026, we're deepening this commitment through our AI Civics initiative, which builds the tools and knowledge communities need to exercise real power over how AI shapes their lives. Our work on AI governance connects directly to the pressures people actually face, including job precarity, cost of living, and the changing climate.

We are working to build countervailing power that puts communities first, and toward a future where technology design and governance is grounded in lived reality, not hype.

Janet Haven
Executive Director
Data & Society

PEOPLE

Our achievements this year were made possible by the vision, dedication, and care of our incredible staff, affiliates, advisors, and board of directors.

Photograph by Samantha Isom, at event Understanding AI: What the Public Needs to Know, 2025.

Board of Directors

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Vice Provost for Faculty Engagement
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Ellen Pao
Co-Founder and CEO, Project Include

Suresh Venkatasubramanian
Professor of Data Science and
Computer Science, Brown University

Felicia Wong
Senior Fellow at the Freedom
Together Foundation

Staff and Researchers

Learn more about our team here

Anuli Akanegbu
Iretiolu Akinrinade
Shannae Basora
Noella Boudart
Kathleen Burlingame
Ania Calderon
Surbhi Chawla
Brian J. Chen
Kiara Childs
Irene Chung
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Chris Redwood
Melinda Sebastian
Ranjit Singh
Emnet Tafesse
Briana Vecchione
Maia Woluchem
Meg Young

OUR VALUES

Our values underpin every aspect of our work, guiding how we collaborate with and support communities and staff members alike.

Photograph by Samantha Isom, at culminating Understanding AI event, 2025.

Independence

Intellectual independence enables us to select our projects, choose methodologies, and make publishing decisions based solely on our analysis of the issues at hand, without political or financial influence. We never accept funding that would compromise the independence or rigor of our work.

Equity

Out of a fundamental respect for diversity and a desire to challenge power relations in data-centric fields, we recognize and embrace differences among us. This requires equitable hiring and retention, centering community experiences in our research, and adhering to the principles of diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility in everything we do.

Creativity

We support interdisciplinary work and deeply value creative expression. Externally, this means supporting original thinking that challenges dominant narratives and engages multiple audiences. Internally, we enable risk-taking research and explore thoughtful engagements.

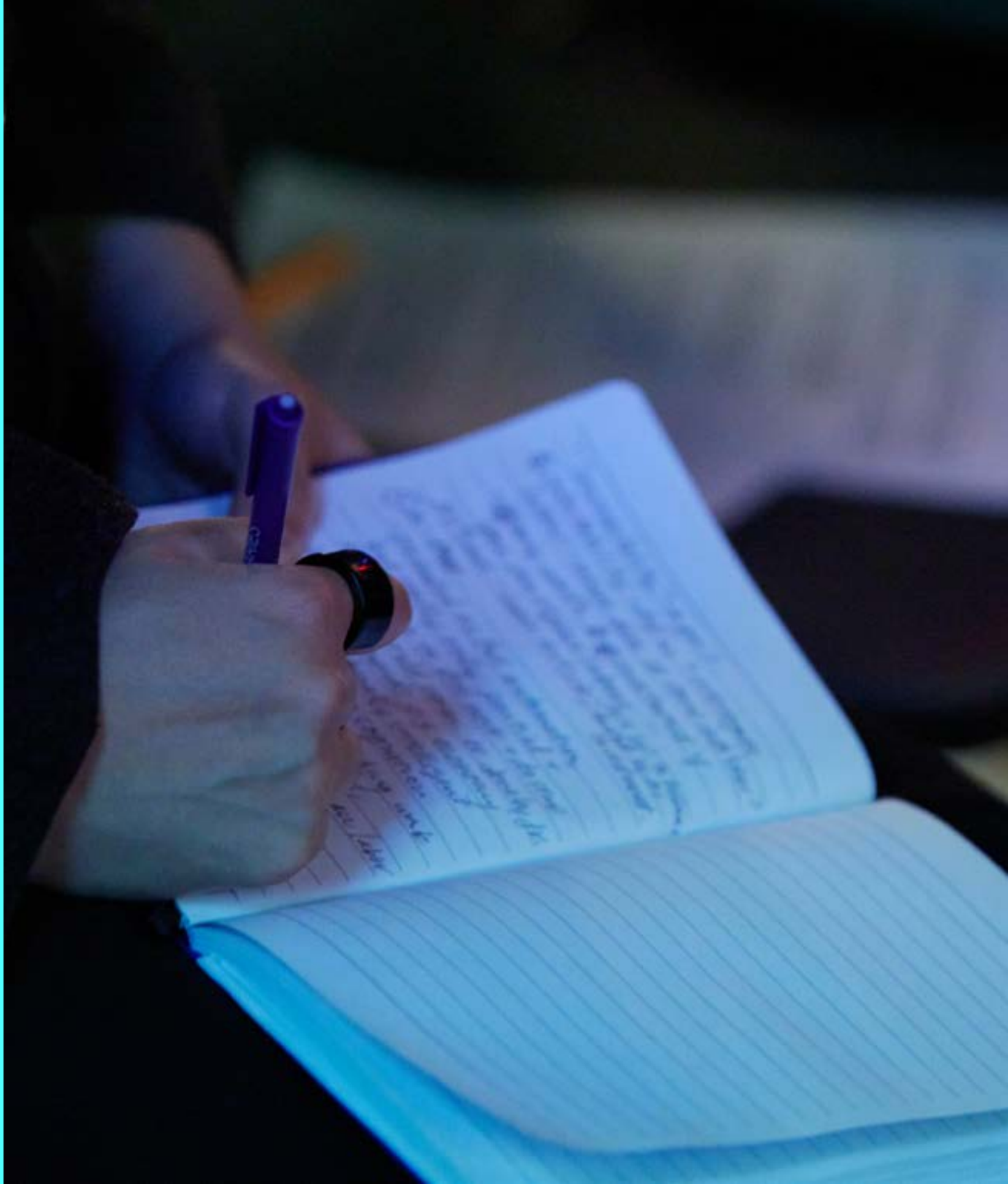
Integrity

We build trust and accountability through our commitment to the independence and autonomy of our research, our transparent funding relationships and mutually shared organizational practices, and our inclusive outreach to a wide range of communities and individuals.

Mutuality

We value reciprocal relationships — not only with other institutions but with the people and communities affected by data-centric technologies. We cultivate respect and mutual responsibility by appreciating our distinct and complementary strengths, actively listening to each other, and striving to understand our shared goals and differences, while being mindful of unequal power dynamics.

OUR GOALS



Photograph by Samantha Isom, at event Understanding AI: Reorienting AI for the Public Interest, 2025.

Data & Society is structured so that these four elements work together towards the goal of shifting power — away from the tech industry, tech oligarchs, and the centralization of power, and toward communities, movements, and institutions who see ungoverned technology as a threat to their rights, freedoms, and livelihoods. 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 overarching goals for the coming years include:

Foundational Research	Counternarratives
Integrate sociotechnical research into structural fights for equity. We foreground questions about power and justice, centering people on the margins. To challenge simplistic narratives about technology and its effects on society, we prioritize grounded research in the field.	Tell compelling stories that counter technocentric hype and point to new ways to imagine our shared futures. We challenge techno-solutionism and narratives of tech inevitability, lifting up voices and narratives that offer bold alternative visions, prioritize the public interest, and situate technologies within the broader structures and societal systems they operate in.
Policy Blueprints	**Network Power**
Ground policy in research, and work with interdisciplinary coalitions. We develop and champion evidence-based policy that reflects the lived realities of impacted communities in local, state, federal, and international forums, both responding to the current environment and looking to future governance opportunities.	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 THEMATIC PRIORITIES

Photograph by Samantha Isom, at event Understanding AI, 2025.

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: we are relevant, rigorous, and responsive.

Democracy in the Age of AI

We seek to understand how information systems, automation, and AI contribute to the tensions between democratic theory and practice. Our research explores how AI is impacting the knowledge and institutions that are essential to functional democracy, including journalism, academia, scientific inquiry, and government itself.

Technology's Impacts on People and Climate

Our research explores how communities negotiate the relationship between technology and climate, with a focus on the needs and perspectives of impacted groups. We aim to provide evidence to inform policies on AI infrastructure, and highlight the tensions between community-driven climate solutions and industry-led approaches.

Worker Power and Collective Rights

Our research examines how algorithmic technologies are impacting the quality of jobs, and workers' rights and privacy. We map the conditions for redistributing power and support interdisciplinary coalitions working toward collective rights and democratic governance.

Equity as an Organizing Principle

Equity shapes every aspect of our work, from internal policies and research methodologies to how we engage with research participants, communities, and partners. In both research and policy, our work foregrounds questions about power and justice, centering people who are at the margins.

OUR YEAR IN REVIEW

Illustration by Anuj Shrestha. 2025.

In 2025, public discourse about technology has been defined not only by rapid technical advancements but by deeper questions about how artificial intelligence and related systems are reshaping social, economic, and political life. Over the past year, our research and policy initiatives have both anticipated and responded to these questions. Through rigorous analysis and public engagement, we've worked responsively to clarify complex issues, elevate evidence-based perspectives, and contribute meaningfully to informed debate.

The following highlights of our work in 2025 reflect the breadth of our inquiry and our continued commitment to examining technology's impact on society.

Engaging the Public

Many people don't have the tools or knowledge to understand how AI systems work, or how to fight back when they cause harm — even as they increasingly shape daily life. Produced in collaboration with the New York Public Library, our four-part "Understanding AI" series drew sold-out, highly engaged audiences as we broke down the social implications of AI and its impacts on democracy, the environment, and human labor. In the coming year we'll expand on this public education work, helping more communities and decision-makers make informed choices about how AI is developed and used.

Exploring What Chatbots Are Doing to and for Our Mental Health

With more people turning to AI chatbots for support and companionship, our researchers are investigating the implications. Reflecting on this research-in-progress, Briana Vecchione looked at what happens when people use these chatbots for therapy. Vecchione and Livia Garofalo reflected on how chatbots are reshaping what it means to be alone and lonely, and, joined by Ranjit Singh and Emnet Tafesse, turned up at least one unexpected use. In a comment to the FDA, Singh, Vecchione, Garofalo, and Meryl Ye drew on this ongoing research to focus on what people's actual, everyday use of chatbots for mental and emotional support should mean for the FDA's approach. And in an opinion piece for Undark, Singh and Garofalo made the case for why chatbots need guardrails to protect users' mental health.

Photograph by Samantha Isom, at event Understanding AI: Standing Up for Human Value in the AI Economy, 2025.

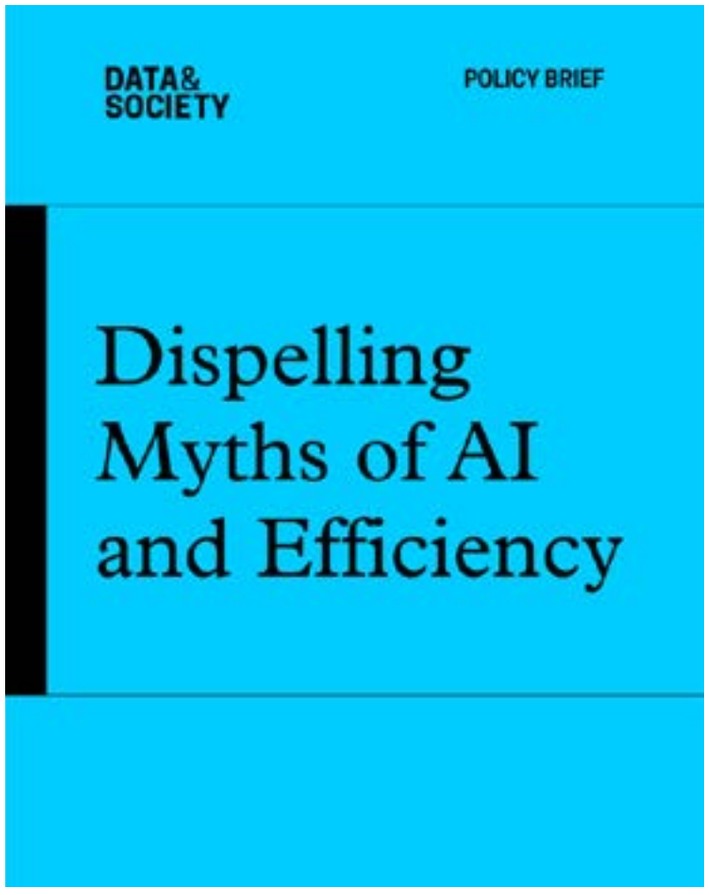
Informing Policymakers

As AI hype fueled myths about the technology's transformative potential, we launched a series of policy briefs to counter them, and to ground policymaking with empirical, sociotechnical evidence. Brian J. Chen refuted myths about AI and efficiency, while Chen and Serena Oduro explained why banning state AI regulation is a bad idea. Tamara Kneese and Maia Woluchem outlined why data centers aren't actually the future of American prosperity. "We should ask who is benefiting from unbridled data center growth, and who is most at risk when these speculative ventures fail," they wrote.

Exposing How Tech Power is Undermining Democracy

The actions of the second Trump administration raised immediate and urgent concerns about the government's use of AI. In multiple venues, we responded with evidence-based warnings about unfolding and potential harms, and highlighted the need to ensure that AI systems serve the public interest rather than private power.

In a statement for the record before the House Oversight Committee, Alice E. Marwick and Brian J. Chen (with Jacob Metcalf, Meg Young, and Serena Oduro) made the case that the government's adoption of AI threatens to erode the rule of law, weaken public trust, and inflict material harm on millions of Americans. Writing in *The Hill*, Chen and Janet Haven explained why legislation that claims to foster innovation would actually amount to a liability shield for the tech industry, while Meg Young told *Gizmodo* that AI simply isn't ready to take on much of the work the administration is eager to have it do. And in *Ideologies of Control: A Series on Tech Power and Democratic Crisis*, a series we curated in collaboration with *Tech Policy Press*, members of our research network explored how today's technology systems are deepening democratic divides.



Policy Brief *Dispelling Myths of AI and Efficiency* by Brian Chen, 2025.

Report *Turning the Tide: Climate Action in and Against Tech* by Tamara Kneese. Illustration by Anuj Shrestha. 2025.

Revealing the Rising Costs of AI Industrial Policy

With data center construction accelerating across the country, Maia Woluchem, Livia Garofalo, and Joan Mukogosi examined the impacts on communities in Pennsylvania (which they also discussed on the *Lawfare* podcast), and Hannah Lipstein and Tamara Kneese explored Virginia's Data Center Alley. Kneese took part in several events that put California data centers in context, and was joined by Cecelia Marrinan in connecting the dots in a piece for *Points*. In a policy memo co-authored with Emma Strubell and published by the Federation of American Scientists, Kneese recommended measuring the full range of AI's environmental impacts, including how data centers impact communities. And Kneese's report *Turning the Tide* examined how climate-conscious tech workers have attempted to reform the tech industry from within, and by applying external forms of pressure through policymaking and activism.

Untangling What AI Means for Jobs

AI is destabilizing work and entire industries, even as its impact on jobs remains highly uncertain. Amid these tensions, a workshop and public event featuring Aiha Nguyen and Julián Posada explored the emerging uses of generative AI technologies across a broad range of work contexts. On *Computer Says Maybe*, Nguyen and Alexandra Mateescu talked to host Alix Dunn about how automation is being used as a threat against workers, and how caregiving and other types of labor are being devalued by AI. Research by Alexandra Mateescu, Zoë West, and Sanjay Pinto demonstrated how AI is reshaping the work of fashion models, and a policy brief we published in collaboration with PowerSwitch Action and Coworker showed how new AI techniques that claim to protect workers' privacy actually do anything but.

Deconstructing Fraud

With generative AI driving a surge in scams and misinformation, *Scam GPT: GenAI and the Automation of Fraud* by Lana Swartz, Alice E. Marwick, and Kate Larson mapped what we know about generative AI's role in scams, the communities most at risk, and the broader economic and cultural shifts at play. In *The Verge*, Marwick and Swartz argued that companies like Meta must be held responsible for their role perpetuating AI scams, and outlined what governments should do in response.

Creating Tools for AI Assessment and the Public Interest

Our research yielded practical tools for assessing and regulating AI in the public interest at a time when such tools are urgently needed. Led by Meg Young, our AIMLab project published a robust toolkit for how to conduct algorithmic impact assessments, alongside documentation of our pilots and reflections on lessons learned. *Gear Shift*, a primer written by Young with Sarah Fox, Vinhcent Le, and Oscar J. Romero Jr., outlined how community input can drive change in public sector technology procurement; while in *Red-Teaming in the Public Interest*, Ranjit Singh, Borhane Blili-Hamelin, Carol Anderson, Emnet Tafesse, Briana Vecchione, Beth Duckles, and Jacob Metcalf considered the evolving landscape of AI evaluation and how the public can be involved.

Report *Red-Teaming in the Public Interest* by Ranjit Singh. Borhane Blili-Hamelin, Carol Anderson, Emnet Tafesse, Briana Vecchione, Beth Duckles, and Jacob Metcalf, 2025. Illustration Gloria Mendoza.

SUPPORTERS

Photograph by Samantha Isom, at event Understanding AI: The Environmental Costs of AI Are Surging – What Now?, 2025.

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The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation
W.K Kellogg Foundation

FINANCIALS

Photograph by Samantha Isom, at event Understanding AI: Reorienting AI for the Public Interest, 2025.

Data & Society's mission is to advance public understanding of the social implications of data-centric technologies and automation. Our team strongly believes that operational decisions should reflect our organizational values of independence, integrity, and equity. You can learn more about our funders, and review our 990s and audited financial statements on our website.

As a 501(c)(3) funded entirely by charitable giving from a range of donors, we recognize the risks inherent to this model, including risks to the integrity and independence of our work, and risks to the viability of executing the work effectively. Therefore, in order to fulfill our mission and adhere to our values, a rigorous gift acceptance policy guides our decision-making about which gifts to accept and which to reject. Read more about our approach in our statement of independence.

Illustration by Gloria Mendoza. 2025.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are incredibly grateful to our donors, supporters, friends, and staff for their belief in Data & Society. Thank you all. Our work would not be possible without their time, dedication, and commitment to achieving Data & Society's mission.

Special thanks to everyone who contributed to this report: Eryn Loeb, Janet Haven, Joanna Gould, Katherine Heidecke, Sona Rai, and Surbhi Chawla.

This report was designed by Andrea Carrillo Iglesias with additional design contributions from Surbhi Chawla and Gloria Mendoza.

Photograph by Samantha Isom, at event Understanding AI: Reorienting AI for the Public Interest, 2025.

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