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Data Worlds

Jonathan Gray

In an influential 2006 TED talk, the late Hans Rosling sought to “debunks myths about the so-called ‘developing world’” in a presentation with global statistical data and visualisations from the Gapminder tool. Later remembered as one who “made data dance” and “statistics sing”, Hans’s presentation may be considered an example of *telling stories with data*, using interactive graphics to engage those beyond researchers, policy-makers and other professional users of global statistics.

Later in the talk he says that projects like Gapminder are only possible if “publicly funded data” is made freely available to use. In a slide he depicts such projects as flowers, growing from the soil of data, with the sun of the public. In this account, institutions should therefore work to remove “prices” and “stupid passwords” from their data, to “liberate” it for all to use. This may be considered an example of *telling stories about data*. We may find such stories about data in many places – in policy documents, political speeches, magazine features, science fiction films, social media posts, technical mailing lists and advocacy materials. Such stories not only tells us about the role and reception of data in society, they may also serve to institutionally stabilise certain imaginaries and visions of the future (Jasanoff, 2015) and to guide how data practitioners use and make sense of data (Dourish & Gómez Cruz, 2018). Thus we may read of data as, for example, “oil”, “soil”, “ecosystem”, “infrastructure”, “resource”, “right” and “control”.

Stories about data can also concern what kinds of *stories with data* are possible. Aside from notions of data as a resource which can be liberated or protected (Gray, 2016), stories about data can tell us about the ways of knowing the world which are inscribed into information systems and their associated creators, users, projects, frictions and trajectories. We might tell stories about what is included and what is left out of data, how phenomena are performed, as well as when, where, why and for whom. As Donna Haraway puts it, “it matters what we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with” (2016).

I have proposed the term “data worlds” to consider the worlds and world-making capacities of data (Gray, 2018). In the case of the global statistical data used by Gapminder, we might consider the forms of understanding which are made possible by statistical data infrastructures, the historically contingent interests and concerns which inform how phenomena are categorised and transformed into data fields – whether populations, ethnicity, education, economic growth, birth rates, natural resources or otherwise. Following such specific styles of sensemaking may lead us to stories of collectives or “social worlds” (eg. statisticians, activists, accountants) for whom these data fields came to matter in various ways. Such collectives may also be involved in various forms of political world-making, whether through international organisations or the management of the “world economy” (Slobodian, 2018).

What kinds of stories can be told about data and data worlds? As Gapminder illustrates, the internet and digital technologies change who can make and make sense of public data – and thus who can participate in the composition of data worlds. What counts as public data is

being challenged by big technology companies, who, in what has been called the "double logic" of platformisation (Helmond, 2015), encourage the widespread use of data from their platforms arising from the activities of users at the same time as centralising and monetising these data flows. But data is not only created and used by institutions, experts and companies but also by other kinds of data practitioners and "data publics" (Ruppert, 2015).

How can we tell such stories about data? As with any story, how to tell well is not something that be exhaustively codified in advance, but must be undertaken as an open-ended, collective task of telling and retelling. One starting point is attending to and learning from how other stories about data are told, and how they might be told differently. For example, researchers in science and technology studies have sought to challenge stories about innovation which were focused on the role of a handful of great figures in unfolding progress, and to also look towards to paths not taken; background infrastructures and labour; the role of women and people of colour; the role of non-human actors, instruments and publication processes; and the social, cultural, economic, political dimensions of inquiry, from funding and policy to colonialism and biopolitics. Taking inspiration from such retellings, we might "follow the actors", changes and controversies around data projects (Latour, 2007) and "stay with the trouble" that we find (Haraway, 2016), rather than smoothing this into more familiar narratives and tropes.

In telling stories about data we must consider who we are telling with and for, and what stories may hope to perform and produce in the world. Stories about data can come to matter not just for researchers, but also as a way to facilitate participation, intervention and resistance by activists, communities, journalists and others.¹

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¹ For more on this see the spotlight on the *Data Journalism Handbook*, pp. XX.

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Bio

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