

Our Data, Ourselves | Foreign Policy

By Philip N. Howard

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Philip N. Howard argues that it is imperative for democracy that big data is put to work for the public good. He lays out an agenda for how this might be done, arguing that regulators in the EU and the US can and should implement sweeping reforms including regular audits and reporting, dedicated public advertising, and data donation.

Concentrated in a few hands, big data is a threat to democracy. Social media companies and political data-mining firms such as Cambridge Analytica have built their businesses by manipulating public life using personal data. Their work has helped heighten ethnic tensions, revive nationalism, intensify political conflict, and even produce new political crises in countries around the world — all while weakening public trust in journalism, voting systems, and electoral outcomes.

[...]

There are two ways to protect democracy from the challenge posed by tech companies' dominance over socially valuable data. The first option is for governments to regulate content on an unprecedented scale. That would oblige public regulators to either review all social media content to judge its appropriateness or provide clear signals to private firms — whether the social media companies themselves or third parties — to perform such content reviews. But the problem with both scenarios is that they would create massive new censorship mechanisms that would further threaten democratic culture.

Far preferable would be market regulations that guide firms on how and when they can profit from information about individuals. Such regulations would put the public back in charge of a valuable collective resource while still allowing citizens to express themselves individually by deciding what to do with their data. To get there, policymakers should focus on five basic reforms, all of which would put public institutions back into the flow of data now dominated by private firms.

Source: [Our Data, Ourselves - Foreign Policy](#)