

Whose Data, Which Commons, What Tragedy? | NewCo Shift

By John Batelle

July 25, 2018

John Batelle argues that we should understand personal data as a public good. Doing so, he says, helps us see efforts by private corporations to access that data as a tragedy of the commons, and that this crisis, in turn, is dangerous for a democratic society.

When a population is aggregated on high-level data points like age and location, we're essentially being judged on a simple shared commons—all 18 year olds who live in Los Angeles are being treated essentially the same, regardless if one person has a lurking gene for cancer and another will live without health complications for decades. In essence, we're sharing the load of public health in common—evening out the societal costs in the process.

But once the system can discriminate on a multitude of data points, the commons collapses, devolving into a system rewarding whoever has the most profitable profile. That 18-year old with flawless genes, the right zip code, an enviable inheritance, and all the right social media habits will pay next to nothing for health insurance. But the 18 year old with a mutated BRCA1 gene, a poor zip code, and a proclivity to sit around eating Pringles while playing Fortnite? That teenager is not going to be able to afford health insurance.

Put another way, adding personalized data to the insurance commons destroys the fabric of that commons. Healthcare has been resistant to this force until recently, but we're already seeing the same forces at work in other aspects of our previously shared public goods.

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