Research Assessment Panels
Observatory on Information and Democracy

Call for Contributions

I/ Introduction

The International Observatory on Information and Democracy is an initiative by the [Forum on Information and Democracy](https://forumondemocracy.org), created by 11 organisations from civil society to expand the principles of the [International Partnership on Information and Democracy](https://ipid.org) and issue concrete recommendations for regulation and self-regulation.

The [International Observatory on Information and Democracy](https://observatoryinfo.org) is a multi-stakeholder entity whose mission is to evaluate the means, norms and architectures of the global information and communication space. The Observatory should provide decision-makers with a shared understanding of the challenges involved, so that they are encouraged to implement democratic principles and standards in this space at the international and national levels. The main mission of the Observatory on Information and Democracy is to propose, in the form of a biennial report, a synthesis of the main knowledge resulting from research on the information and communication space. The report will provide an overview of the state-of-the-art of existing research, informing the questions raised in the framework of regulatory decisions. It will also provide an assessment of the gaps in research. This report will be addressed to governments, policymakers, regulatory bodies, NGOs, public information bodies, and tech corporations, to provide a shared understanding of the structure of the information and communication space and how it impacts democracy.

At their first meeting in September, the Steering Committee confirmed the Observatory roadmap and meta-analysis priority themes around which three Research Assessment Panels which include a wide network of researchers and academics. Led by a Scientific Director, expert rapporteurs and the Observatory’s permanent staff, these Research Assessment Panels are working respectively on:
- Artificial Intelligence, Information ecosystems and democracy
- Media, Politics and Trust
- Data Governance and Democracy.
- Misinformation and Disinformation as a cross cutting issue.

Their production will constitute one chapter of the inaugural report of the Observatory that will be published in late 2024.

II/ Research Assessment Panels (RAPs) on Data Governance and Democracy

Data governance serves as a pivotal point of convergence where structures and institutions of capitalism intersect with the way data is produced, processed, circulated and used by public or private actors reflecting the pervasive influence of capitalist institutions on these components. A comprehensive understanding of how economic
forces shape the data landscape is needed. This RAP will examine how formal and informal policy and regulatory measures mold data practices and the contours of data ecosystems, as well as how data and data analytics control and discipline human behavior.

This RAP gives particular attention to the way algorithmic information systems privilege knowledge that can be captured or rendered as data over other kinds of knowledge, and how massive data algorithms (marketed by tech corporations as “artificial intelligence” (AI)) affect democratic possibilities within systems for producing and sharing knowledge and information. The dominance of massive data aggregation as the basis for systems of knowledge production and sharing, and the dependence of those systems on algorithmic technologies which are often privately owned, raise concerns around the quality of information; the labor conditions of information producers and other workers; the environmental impacts of energy-intensive algorithmic products; the biases, inaccuracies and distortions of algorithmic outputs; and the roles of human beings in decision-making processes, impacts which vary in the global North and South.

This RAP will treat massive data aggregation both in relation to the potential for beneficial outcomes and as an anti-democratic economic phenomenon and large tech company algorithmic information systems as an anti-democratic epistemic form. It will critically examine the large tech companies’ monopolistic activities that are made possible by gaps in data governance. It will also examine the relationship between data monopolization and the capacity of individuals and communities to access high quality information for potentially better outcomes. It will focus on the nuanced dynamics around how data governance approaches developed in and by actors in the global North are exported and resisted by actors in the global South.

III/ Contributions for each RAP

To address the questions of each RAP, we invite contributors to answer the questions below. Contributions do not need to cover all aspects listed below, but can be focused on specific ones. This list is not exhaustive and contributions addressing related areas are welcome. Contributions can take the form of existing academic papers, reports or opinion pieces on the topics addressed by the Research Questions below. Please use the format provided below for your responses.

3.1 RAP on Data Governance and Democracy - Research Questions

1. What are the most crucial intervention points where “data governance” can have positive impacts on the information ecosystem? For example: (1) governance around modes of collection; (2) governance around collection of particular types of data; (3) governance around parties involved in data collection; (4) governance around storage, sharing, and selling of data; (5) governance around use and deployment of data-intensive products.

2. How have data aggregation and algorithmic technologies altered the systems through which people build, share and receive knowledge and information?

3. How does the dominance of data aggregation and algorithmic technologies
interfere with the deliberative activities necessary for the survival of participatory democracy and what forms of dependency does this create for industries and private users?

4. What are the common features of technologies and services marketed under the ‘AI’ label? What does this tell us about the corporate incentives, strategies and practices involved in designing, developing, selling, and controlling the technology?

5. How do corporations and/or governments justify the use of data relating to private human experience by digital platforms and what are the implications for intellectual property regimes?

6. How can communities interested in resisting corporate-owned digital technology systems develop and deploy alternative products and services for the production, circulation and use of data (and information), including information commons approaches? To what extent do alternative configurations of platforms, rooted in commons-based and community-driven frameworks, contribute to broader implications in the landscape of data dynamics?

7. To what degree and through what mechanisms are data governance approaches and digital technology systems formulated by actors in the global North exported and confronted by actors in the global South?

8. How might a nuanced reconceptualization of data governance and aggregation counter prevailing normative assessments, positioning them as conduits for positive outcomes such as empowerment and emancipation?

3.2 Format

We welcome your contributions to the questions above by submitting a comment or papers, reports or published opinion pieces. You may submit the contribution template directly to our email: observatory@informationdemocracy.org in English, French, Spanish or Portuguese by 7 January.

The call for contributions is open to any individual or institution working in any capacity on these issues. We will not attribute any individual comments to you by name. However, with your permission we will thank you for your contribution in the Acknowledgements section of the RAP’s final report. If you agree, please include your biography or description of the institution in your contribution.

IV/ Methodology

The Observatory will use meta-research, by aggregating and synthesizing existing evidence through literature reviews and thematic analysis, informed by expert consultations as appropriate.

V/ Deliverables and objectives

The first report of the Observatory will be published in December 2024.
IV/ Team

Scientific Director: Robin Mansell

Lead Rapporteur: Rob Procter

Media Rapporteurs: Emily Tucker, Gyan P Tripathi