



Asking About Data

Some Notes on the Philosophy of Data and a
New Methodology for Experimental Philosophy

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Abstract

What is data? That question is the fundamental investigation of this dissertation. Inspired by Experimental Philosophy's exploration of moral philosophy, I have developed a methodology from social-scientific processes to explore how different people understand the concept of data, rather than to rely on my own philosophical intuitions or thought experiments about the "nature" of data. The evidence I have gathered as to different individuals' philosophies of data can be used to inform further inquiry of data and the design of information systems.

My research demonstrates that people have different philosophies of data. The methodology of the Social Data Flow Network, created for this dissertation, has proven able to probe those philosophies. The Social Data Flow Network, based on a Data Flow Diagram and combined with ideas from Social Network Analysis, provides a way of discovering practical definitions of hard-to-operationalize terms like data. The process of repeatedly categorizing various items as data allows the methodology to explore how participants actually use the term, rather than relying on theoretical dictionary-based definitions.

Analysis of the interviews found three different philosophies of data: data as communications, a container for meaning; data as subjective observations, sense-impressions filtered by knowledge; and data as objective facts, measurements revealing the relationships of reality. Further research conducted through a survey also provided evidence of these different philosophies of data.

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Asking About Data

Exploring different realities of data with a Social Data Flow Network

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Contents

1	Acknowledgements	1
1.1	Figures	1

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To Lucy: "Coffee on Sunday?"

To Mikhail, I can intone only: "Ia! Ia! Cthulhu fhtagh! Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah-nagl fhtaga -"

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1.1 Figures

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