

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

Thesis/Dissertation Sheet

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Abbreviation for degree as given in the University calendar:

PhD

School: Humanities

Faculty: Arts and Social Sciences

Title: Asking About Data Exploring Different Realities of Data via the Social Data Flow Network Methodology

Abstract

What is data? That question is the fundamental investigation of this dissertation. 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' constructions of data can be used to inform further inquiry of data and the design of information systems.

My research demonstrates that people have different constructions of data. The methodology of the SDFN, created for this dissertation, has proven able to probe those understandings. The SDFN, loosely based on a DFD and combined with ideas from SNA, 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 constructions 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.

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