

FOREWORD— DATA (V.)

Let's turn data into a verb. I data you, you data me. They data us, we data them.

As your Concise Oxford sails toward me from across the room, let's take some time to consider the arguments:

The word data has been in a pronounced flux over the last ten years, as its role and function has been redefined by technology and culture. A decade ago, data was firmly a plural noun. Specifically, it was the plural of datum — one datum, two data. Back then, you could point and laugh at the data amateurs because they would say 'data is' rather than 'data are.' Of course, those data newbies went on to form companies, make software, build databases, write books and give TED talks. And slowly, data did turn into a particular kind of singular: it has become, commonly, a mass noun.

I data you



Mass nouns are treated as a single thing, no matter how much of that thing there may be. Blood, homework, software, trash, love, happiness, advice, peace, confidence, flour, bread and honey — all mass nouns, because they cannot be counted. I promise that you'll only read the phrase big data once in this essay, and it's

already over: this particular catch phrase was adopted exactly because we'd passed a kind of rubicon, where data could no longer be counted. It had become so vast that it could no longer be operated on by lowly humans, but instead had to be computed by always vaster and more elaborate systems of algorithms and semi-structured databases. As technology reacted to this dramatic shift in scale, so did language, and the word data found itself massified.

You data me



Since data has already endured such a drastic grammatical shift, perhaps we can persuade the gods of common usage to shift the word's accepted part-of-speech entirely: can we make data into a verb? In case this still seems too outlandish, consider two synonymous neighbours of data: record, and measure. Both of these words exist as nouns (I made a record), as verbs (We measured the temperature of the room) and indeed as verbal nouns (They found a list of measurements and recordings). In comparison, isn't it strange to keep data confined to the dull, inactive realm of the noun?

Both of the above words have a verbal form, which makes communication about the act of making records or taking measurements much easier. Rather than saying "I am going to be making a record of this conversation," I can simply say "I am recording this conversation." If we verbified data, rather than having to say that the NSA is collecting data on our every interaction, movement and metabolic function, we could simply say: They data us.

They data us



Data is not inert, yet its perceived passivity is one of its most dangerous properties. When we are warned that a government is collecting data about its citizens, we may be underwhelmed specifically because this act of collection seems to be so harmless, so indifferent. But of course data is not collected and then left alone: it is used as a substrate for decision making; and as an instrument for differentiation, discrimination and damage. Putting an active form of the word data into common parlance could serve as a reminder that the systems of data collection and uses are humming with capacity for influence, action and violence.

Making data a verb also exposes to us the power imbalances that have kept our collective endeavours drastically off-kilter. Grammatically speaking, data-as-verb would present a number of possibilities for subject/object combinations:

- I data you.
- You data me.
- We data you.
- You data us.
- They data me.
- They data us.
- We data them.

Exposed to this rich possibility of cause and effect, the common usages of data today become strikingly narrow: in our lived data experiences we are objects, rather than subjects. Google reads our every e-mail, placing us ingloriously in marketing buckets based on what we write to our friends, colleagues and lovers.¹ Uber's algorithms note our late night voyages as records of romantic trysts.² They data us, then they data us again.

Even the innocent fitness tracker, on paper an embodiment of 'I data myself,' isn't so much about quantified self as it is about quantified selves, less a tool for individuals to track their own beating hearts than a system to find an aggregated 24-year-old Bay Area resident that can be marketed against. These devices are exciting toys for runners and walkers but also for lawyers, who have found in them a new way to argue against claims of personal injury.

Yet there is plenty of potential for us to data. Last year we built Floodwatch,³ a browser-based tool that allows users to track the web advertising profiles that are being authored about them — empowering individuals to track the trackers. Mapping Police Violence,⁴ a project by Ferguson activists @samsway @Nettaaaaaaaaa and @deray, keeps a record of every black American killed by police in the USA. In doing so, the project reminds us how powerful the simple act of data collection can be, particularly when that data is something that the powerful don't want us to see.

These projects give us a glimpse of what can happen if we abandon our idea of data as an innocent, passive noun. By embracing the new verbal form of data, we might better understand its potential for action, and in turn move beyond our own prescribed role as the objects in data sentences.

In doing so, perhaps we can imagine a future perfect for data, where not only will they have dataed us, we will have dataed them. A future, perhaps, where we all data together.

We all data together



¹ [HTTPS://MEDIUM.COM/@JEFFGOULD/COURTS-DOCS-SHOW-HOW-GOOGLE-SLICES-USERS-INTO-MILLIONS-OF-BUCKETS-EC9C768B6AE9](https://medium.com/@jeffgould/courts-docs-show-how-google-slices-users-into-millions-of-buckets-ec9c768b6ae9)

² [HTTP://WWW.WHOSDRIVINGYOU.ORG/BLOG/UBERS-DELETED-RIDES-OF-GLORY-BLOG-POST](http://www.whosdrivingyou.org/blog/ubers-deleted-rides-of-glory-blog-post)

³ [HTTP://FLOODWATCH.O-C-R.ORG](http://floodwatch.o-c-r.org)

⁴ [HTTP://MAPPINGPOLICEVIOLENCE.ORG](http://mappingpoliceviolence.org)