



**John Robb**

## **Making Big Data Work for Us**

Big Data has become central to economic and social progress in the 21st Century. Depending on what we do right now, Big Data and what it makes possible will be either a boon or a bane. Here's how to make it work for us, rather than against us.

### **Big Data is Essential**

How we handle Big Data and what we build with it will determine how successful we are in the 21st Century.

- It is already immensely valuable, as evidenced by the valuations of the world's biggest tech companies. It will only become more so as corporations use it to train economy and society scale AI's<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The AIs that are currently being developed aren't the human equivalent AIs of science fiction. They are closer to symbionts that live in the space between us, feeding off of the data we produce and providing services to us in return. It's useful to think of these AIs as an intelligent interface layer between us as individuals and everything else: other people, technological artifacts, our work, and the external world (increasingly as AR emerges).

- Every product and service sold will eventually utilize this data *and* these AIs. If we successfully harness the development of Big Data, it will drive economic prosperity and societal well-being well for decades to come.
- There are three major socioeconomic approaches to Big Data: China's centrally managed approach (sacrifice freedom for economic prosperity), Europe's opt-out privacy approach (sacrifice economic prosperity for traditional social stability), and the corporate-led approach used by the US and most of the world (this path is up to us).

## Data Ownership

If Big Data is valuable, how do we make it work for us? We start with a critical early reform: *data ownership*.

- The closest model for our current system is feudalism. Lords/corporations own all of the data to build AIs of immense value. Corporations farm us for our data both as private citizens and while at work.
- To cast off this feudal system, we should apply the same solution that worked in the past: ownership. In the past, that meant giving people the right to own land and exercise rights over its use. In our current situation, that means giving people the right to their data and exercise rights over its use.
- Data ownership works, in practice, by allowing people to aggregate their data safely, pool it with other people's data to increase its value radically, and generate benefits (royalties, services, etc.) by licensing its use by third parties.

## Digital Rights

With Big Data, we run the risk of a long night of data-fueled oppression. Here's how to avoid that future.

- Big Data and the AIs derived from it are already being used to monitor and control societal discourse (and increasingly behaviors) in real-time, down to the conversational level. Worse, these big systems can punish infractions with bans

that disconnect people from the myriad of online services that are now essential to modern life (think: disconnection as an open-air gulag).

- To avoid Big Data becoming a means of ubiquitous oppression, as we see elsewhere, we need digital rights. These rights would enumerate our freedoms. Of speech: what can't we say online in public or in private? Of association: when can you be banned, and when would algorithmic soft bans be permissible (you can publish, but nobody can see it)? Of resolution: requirements for the rapid notification of actions taken and the *resolution* of disputes.
- Big Data can create barriers to small business success. Small businesses suffer from the same problems as individuals -- from barriers to access (only the company store allows access, and it's terribly expensive) to data loss (the big data incumbents capture customer data to product mix data to customer service data and use it against the business). Therefore, we can adapt many of the remedies needed to protect individuals, to protect small businesses.

## **Digital Identity**

To tie this all together, we need a new form of digital identity.

- Digital identity is in addition to anonymity and not a replacement for it. Digital identity will serve as a way to *dampen* the disruption we currently see online.
- Digital identity will serve as a means of exercising ownership rights over data (from claiming ownership to licensing it to collecting benefits).
- Digital identity will allow us to exercise our freedoms -- from rights of speech to rights of association to rights of speedy resolution of disputes.

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