

Upcoming Public Lecture: Nick Couldry on the Myth of Big Data



In the past year, the LSE Media Policy Project blog has contained a lot of discussion of “big data”. **Stefan Strauss** and **Monica Horten** wrote about the EU’s Data Protection Directive and the protection of personal data from mass collection by corporate interests. Oxford’s **Ian Brown** explained how big data is accessed by government agencies, and our **Internet Governance Series** covered recent attempts by Brazil and other countries to take control over where big data is stored and transferred. But have we been perpetuating flawed assumptions about the nature of big data?

In his **upcoming inaugural lecture** in the LSE Department of Media and Communications, Nick Couldry will explain a *myth* laying at the heart of our discussions of big data.

According to Couldry, the *myth of big data* is that all the output that individuals create offer a new route to understanding society and must therefore be ‘datafied’, or in other words, harnessed to the production of ‘data’.

By naming this myth, Couldry seems to challenge the idea that big data has value, or can actually tell us something about society and the people in it. He also argues that:

The myth of big data encompasses everything – the entire extent of the data we generate as we live and interact – and its purpose is to underwrite our belief that such data offers a new route to social knowledge.

The assumption that big data is worth something and therefore governments or companies have an interest in collecting it forms the basis for debates about policy interventions aimed at managing or limiting this collection, but Couldry argues:

The myth of big data has already rationalised a state of affairs where governments and corporations increasingly are prioritising access to big data in their visions of how they will govern or profit (or both). We are only a step away from the fact, not the myth, of continuous surveillance from all directions as the new basis of how societies and the world are ordered.

What are the consequences of society accepting the perpetual collection of big data fuelled by the myth of big data?

Index’s **Kirsty Hughes** has argued that even if it is not used or analysed, just the collection of big data has a chilling effect on expression – an argument supported by the findings of a **recent report** from American PEN. So, how dangerous is the myth of big data?

Nick Couldry’s public lecture will take place on **Thursday 21 November at 6.30pm in the Sheikh Zayed Theatre, New Academic Building, LSE** and is open to the public.

The article gives the views of the author, and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics.



Nick Couldry will be giving a public lecture on 21 November at LSE

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