Five Minutes with Alison Powell on what data means, how it is produced and what influence it has for decision-makers.

Data, information and knowledge are powerful aspects of contemporary society. Managing Editor Sierra Williams recently caught up with **Alison Powell** *on the development and expansion of Data and Society activities taking place at the LSE. Alongside a new MSc programme, a broad range of research is set to be explored, such as the ethics of data and surveillance systems, the roles of data intermediaries in creating value and meaning from data, and the social and cultural consequences of platforms.*
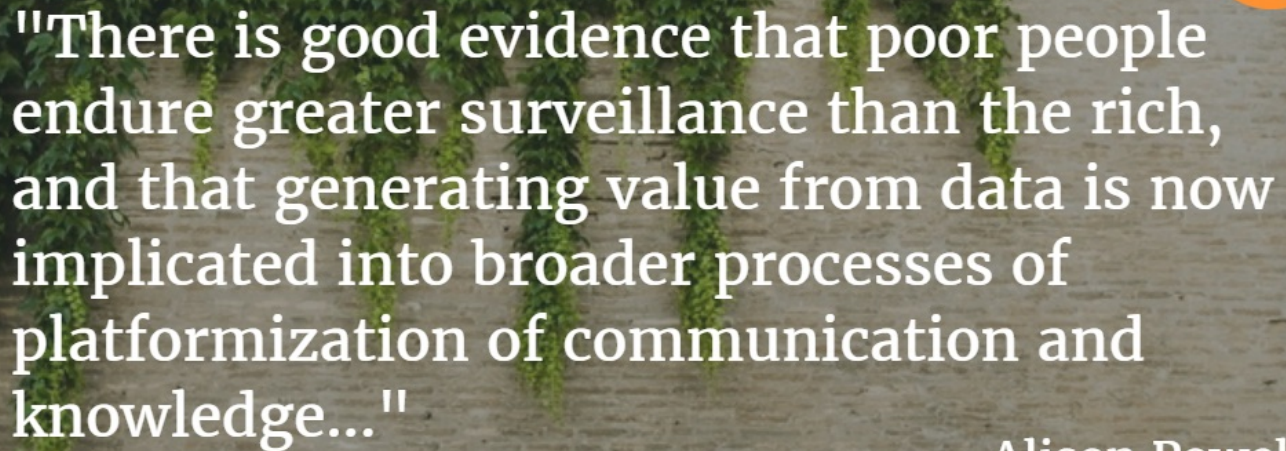
You have launched a new MSc Media and Communications (Data and Society) at the LSE – what is the aim of the programme?

The MSc in Media and Communications (Data & Society) took in its first students in Michelmas Term 2015. We launched officially on 25 January 2016 with a series of events on algorithmic accountability (more on this here). This is part of a larger integrated teaching and research endeavour called LSE Data and Society. This year our collaborative work focuses on algorithmic accountability, the use of automation in news production, and the intersection between data collection and the experiences of traditionally marginalized communities. Our faculty study the ethics of data and surveillance systems, the roles of data intermediaries in creating value and meaning from data, and the social and cultural consequences of platforms. Our students come from around the world – many returning to study after years of work – and bring a wealth of experience from fields including resource management, journalism and health.

What differentiates this programme from other university courses on data or intensive data training or coding courses?

This program aims to provide a broad understanding of the development and forms of media systems in relation to political economy, regulation and power, production and organisation, processes of mediation and influence, communication content and audience response AND a broad understanding of data, information and knowledge as aspects of contemporary society, including theoretical and analytic perspectives. In real terms this means thinking about what data means, how it's produced, what influence it has for decision-makers and for the media. It's more a course that equips students to think about, through, and with data rather than to process data. I like to imagine that we are training data ethicists and data governors.

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– Alison Powell

THE IMPACT BLOG

The impact of big data, algorithms, analytics all seem to be very topical issues across sectors – what is driving this interest? Is the dominant narrative moving from a focus on 'the promise of big data' to the 'threats of big data'?

Yes, there is a certain amount of 'threats of big data' now appearing in public discourse, and I think this drives home the need for the kind of space we are producing. In order to understand these threats we need to determine the relationship between how they are represented and the details of their impact. This is a crucial place for media and communication scholars, since we are trained to be able to understand the relationship between the symbolic and the material. We are also very interdisciplinary in our approach, especially via LSE Data & Society. The students have access to courses across the School, and in our research we are building good links between Media and Communications, Management, Methodology, Law and International Development, all because of this need to investigate specific consequences from many perspectives.

What scope is there for research on data to shape how publics understand the digital world and the ethical implications of the digital?

There are issues here about visibility and transparency of processes, which can be improved through a move to the digital, but also issues of equality and access to services when these services become delivered based on 'digital traces'. There is good evidence that poor people endure greater surveillance than the rich, and that generating value from data is now implicated into broader processes of platformization of communication and knowledge – think of how all of your everyday communication takes place over Facebook, and how the corporation is able to use all of that data to profile you and all of your connections. Facebook and other social media data is now used to derive credit scores, for example.

Can you give a brief snapshot of #LSEDataSociety events and activities that will be taking place this year?

In addition to our launch events in January which included a workshop and public lecture, we are holding two further invitation-only Data Delve research events, focused on algorithmic news production and data and inequality. We are also following up on the Python coding training that we've been able to provide with the support of the Methodology department and holding a 2 day 'data sprint' for our students, facilitated by Dr Bernie Hogan from Oxford.

Stay tuned for further activity on the LSE Impact Blog on Data and Society themes discussed above. For more on

the MSc also see, [LSE Data and Society delves into key social issues of algorithmic control](#) on the Media Policy Project blog.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the Author

Dr. Alison Powell is Assistant Professor and Programme Director of the MSc in Media and Communication (Data & Society). She researches how people's values influence the way technology is built, and how technological systems in turn change the way we work and live together.