

NFTs and the Reversal of Extractive Datafication: Towards a Digital Sovereignty

Kendra Mills Department of Sociology – 2020 alumnus

Divya Mehta Department of International Development – 2020 alumnus

The non-fungible tokens (NFT) market represents a moment of radical potential for the reappropriation of plundered data rights. Covid-19 has exposed or exacerbated pre-existent socioeconomic precarity; at the same time, companies like Facebook and Amazon have flourished, in no small part because of their capacity to commodify their users' personal data. In this context, it is imperative to imagine a redistributive project that acknowledges personal data sovereignty. NFT trading has inadvertently set the precedent for a revolution in the recognition of data ownership. NFT transactions are predicated on the idea that digital goods, including metadata, are unique—for example, Jack Dorsey's first tweet, which sold for almost \$3 million. In this way, it has become clear that data is a distributable good worthy of compensation.

In this project, which interpolates human rights discourse and redistributive development principles, we will seek to answer three questions: Can personal data—emails, webpage visits, doorbell recordings—be transacted in alignment with the cryptographic NFT model? Is there sufficient support for personal data compensation to pass the requisite threshold for meaningful collective bargaining? And beyond the proprietarian context, how might the exchange of personal data contribute to the realisation of social values such as autonomy and equality? This project will include a robust study of NFT trading mechanisms, analysis of historical collective bargaining documents, and survey results from the EU, where data protection has been prioritised. We hope to measure public support and determine whether compensatory schemes can be modelled on the current NFT boom.