What the new Government should be doing on Data and AI - roundtable write-up

August 2024
Contents

The story so far 3

Roundtable 5
What Labour could/should do first 5
Impressions from the opposition campaigns and manifestos 7
Insights from the plenary session 9

Looking ahead 11

About

Since the UK General Election, the ODI has engaged with nearly 100 ODI members, network partners and wider stakeholders to inform our approach to working with the new government on data and AI. From placing AI principles on a statutory footing - to ensure ethical use - and strengthening cybersecurity measures to protect against malicious attacks, our network has had a lot to debate and discuss. This account summarises the thoughts and ideas they told us are most important to them during a roundtable event on 15th June 2024. If you have any feedback on this document please get in touch with policy.team@theodi.org

This paper is published under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International licence.

[Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International licence]
The story so far

The newly elected government faces significant challenges and opportunities in shaping the UK’s data and AI landscape. As we look ahead to the coming year, it’s crucial to consider how we can build a thriving ecosystem that benefits people throughout the country and beyond. Earlier this year, at a cross-party parliamentary event, we launched the ODI Policy Manifesto, presenting a series of recommendations structured around the six strategic principles that the ODI believes are foundational to a thriving data ecosystem; one that benefits people, the environment and the economy. The principles are equally true for technologies that rely on data – including AI – and are:

**Principle 1** - We believe that a strong data infrastructure is the foundation for building an open, trustworthy data ecosystem on a global scale

**Principle 2** - Strong data infrastructure includes data across the spectrum, from open to shared to closed. But the best possible foundation is open data, supported and sustained as data infrastructure

**Principle 3** - For data to work for everyone, it needs to work across borders. For this to happen ethically and sustainably, there needs to be trust – trust in data and trust in those who share it
Principle 4 - There is greater need than ever for trusted, independent organisations to help people to benefit from better data infrastructure.

Principle 5 - For data to work for everyone, those collecting and using it need to be highly alert to inequalities, biases and power asymmetries. Everyone must take proactive steps to ensure that they contribute to creating a diverse, equitable and inclusive data ecosystem.

Principle 6 - The world needs a new cohort of data leaders – individuals who have data knowledge and skills and are equipped to understand the value, limitations and opportunities offered by data, data practices and data sharing.

In addition to our work on the Policy Manifesto, the ODI has also produced a white paper, Building a better future with data and AI, based on findings from our research on data-centric AI during the first half of 2024. The paper identifies significant weaknesses in the UK’s tech infrastructure that threaten the predicted potential gains - for people, society and the economy - from the AI boom. It also outlines the ODI’s recommendations for creating diverse, fair data-centric AI.
Roundtable

At our roundtable on 15th June, before the King’s Speech, we welcomed nearly 100 people from lots of different sectors and organisations, including regulators, civil servants, technology professionals, SMEs, and civil society groups. They presented a rich diversity of views.

During the event, we held two sessions as breakout groups, concentrating on:

- What the Labour Government could/should do first
- Impressions from the opposition campaigns and manifestos

After each breakout session, we came back together to discuss the thoughts and ideas that had been shared, and have a wider conversation about what should happen next.

1. What Labour could/should do first

The success of the government’s agenda will hinge on trust, transparency, and high levels of accountability in data use. As outlined in our Policy Manifesto, we need a robust and future-proofed legislative and regulatory regime that is cohesive, comprehensive, and has people and society at its core.

Roundtable participants highlighted a lot of topics they believed the new government could and should prioritise, including¹:

- **Digital prison services**: Implementing digital reforms in prison services to improve efficiency and outcomes
- **Statutory AI principles**: Placing AI principles on a statutory footing to ensure ethical AI use
- **Data sharing in health**: Enhancing data sharing between health and other sectors, moving beyond secure data environments for research. At the clinical level, using data to enable a focus on prevention

¹ Note that these are areas of interest/concern of event participants and do not necessarily reflect the views/concerns of the ODI in all cases.
- **NHS digital reform**: Prioritising digital reforms within the NHS to increase productivity and improve patient care
- **Diverse clinical trials**: Looking at how technology can be deployed - and communities engaged - in efforts to ensure clinical trials reflect the diversity of the populations the drugs are targeting
- **Creating tech jobs outside London**: Focusing on creating jobs and development opportunities outside of London to foster regional economic growth
- **New organisational structure**: Clarifying the details of the new organisational structure in government, where various data and AI-related entities have been grouped together within the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology
- **Cybersecurity**: Strengthening cybersecurity measures to protect against malicious attacks
- **Public awareness of data and AI**: Increasing public awareness and understanding, including about benefits and ethical concerns
- **Digital identity**: Developing interoperable and reusable digital identity solutions
- **AI Regulation**: Regulating AI in the private sector to align with government objectives for ethical and responsible AI, preventing it from becoming a vector of inequality
- **Generative AI regulation**: Considering regulation and government use of generative AI technologies
- **Infrastructure sovereignty**: Ensuring sovereignty over digital infrastructure to maintain national security and data integrity
- **EU equivalence in data regulations**: Maintaining alignment with EU data and digital regulations during any potential upcoming UK-EU treaty negotiations
- **Data as AI feedstock**: Recognising that data is the essential feedstock of AI and understanding the political, environmental, and social implications of this
- **Digital divide**: Addressing the digital divide to ensure equitable access to technology and digital services
- **Open finance**: Promoting open finance to foster innovation
and transparency in financial services

- **Workers' rights:** Ensuring workers' rights around data access and privacy are protected

**To note:** Both digital ID and cybersecurity were featured in the legislative agenda set out at the King's Speech, more details of which can be found on our blog [here](#).

## 2. Impressions from the opposition campaigns and manifestos

Roundtable participants talked about whether, given the scale of Labour's victory at the General Election, the position of opposition parties matters as much as internal factions within Labour. However, it was noted that even a 4% swing at a national level could lead to a change in government again at the next election. That, and the fact that there are now a wider range of parties for voters to choose from - and media to amplify their messages - means that opposition parties might matter less for votes in the House while mattering more for national debates. Attendees thought about:

- **Engaging with legislation:** Exploring how a smaller opposition can constructively engage with or amend legislation and influence government priorities.

- **Transparency in spending priorities:** Keeping government accountable to taxpayer concerns and public service requirements.

- **Public opinion vs. opposition priorities:** Debating whether public opinion or opposition priorities should hold more weight in shaping government actions and how to effectively bring the public along with policymaking.

In the immediate aftermath of an election, what the opposition parties are focusing on and why is a bit trickier to navigate than the incoming government, with some parties following stricter processes in policy development than others.
After 14 years in government, the Conservatives becoming HM Loyal Opposition means a new leadership contest and the chance to reset policy positions.

In their manifesto, the Conservatives set out a number of positions around data and AI including placing the AI Safety Institute on a statutory footing and ensuring greater copyright protections during AI rollout. Yet it’s not clear whether the party will continue to press for these measures - and others - post-election defeat and, significantly, a change to the party’s leadership.

The Liberal Democrats and Greens have a more collaborative approach and their manifesto commitments are therefore likely to have more sticking power. The Liberal Democrats newly expanded voting bloc means significant Parliamentary support for their positions on NHS digital transformation, expanding NHS app use for patient data control, a Patient’s Charter, digital literacy initiatives, and opposition to biometric surveillance. Whether these positions conflict with their party’s tandem support for data sharing with European police, an EU-US-UK Technology Council and cross-sector AI regulation remains to be seen.

The Greens’ manifesto included several initiatives aimed at promoting data rights and ethical AI use, including: greater data rights for gig economy workers, a precautionary principle approach to AI development, and an amendment to the Online Safety Act to try and tackle fake news on social media.

Reform UK entered Parliament with five seats and their policy positions, including support for a Digital Bill of Rights, a hands-off approach to AI development (which had no mention in their manifesto or ‘contract’ at all), opposition to a Central Bank Digital Currency, and opposition to content moderation on social media, are all still intact but liable to change. The party’s ‘contract’ was written by a policy team before leader Nigel Farage MP decided to stand, and their policy positions are likely to be reactive to ongoing debates and formed primarily by the small group of newly elected MPs.
Our roundtable participants talked about their impressions from the various party campaigns and manifesto commitments too, noting:

- **Regulation for unknown risks**: Emphasising the need for regulation to protect against unknown risks associated with emerging technologies
- **Policy shifts**: Noting the immediate shift – by the new administration – to change previous government positions on issues like data centre planning permissions, onshore solar, and housing targets
- **Data control vs. devolution**: Balancing the government’s desire to control data standards and interpretation of legislation with the need to devolve power and responsibility to regional and local governments
- **Community engagement**: Increasing citizen and community assembly involvement in the democratic process, inspired by models like the Humanity Project
- **Private AI development**: Addressing concerns about potential over-trust, lack of awareness - or complacency - about AI development and corporate lobbying
- **Low data literacy**: Tackling low data literacy levels
- **EU renegotiation**: Considering the impact of renegotiations with the EU on data policies and regulations
- **Social media and elections**: Addressing election interference and the role of social media

### 3. Insights from the plenary session

Our roundtable plenary discussion revealed a range of perspectives and concerns from various stakeholders around:

1. **Transparency and accountability**: Some participants from civil society expressed concern about the lack of transparency in algorithmic decision-making within government. They emphasised the need for clear
mechanisms to ensure accountability, particularly as AI becomes more prevalent in public services

2. **Environmental concerns:** Representatives from environmental groups raised questions about how the government plans to balance the energy-intensive nature of generative AI with environmental sustainability goals. This aligns with our Policy Manifesto's emphasis on considering the broader impacts of data and AI systems

3. **Inclusive design and adoption:** Healthcare professionals highlighted the importance of involving younger generations in the design and implementation of digital tools, particularly in the NHS. Participants stressed that adoption of these tools is often hampered by outdated interfaces, echoing our manifesto's call for better data infrastructure that works for public services and public servants

4. **Ethical considerations:** Civil rights advocates voiced concerns about the potential for racial profiling in AI software and the use of robotics in healthcare without proper supervision. This underscores the need for a diverse, equitable, and inclusive data ecosystem, as outlined in our Policy Manifesto

5. **Public engagement and understanding:** Several participants emphasised the importance of simplifying the language used in data and tech policy to make it more accessible to the general public. They suggested that building public trust and understanding is crucial for the successful implementation of data and AI initiatives

6. **Collaboration and storytelling:** One attendee stressed the need for collaboration to make a compelling case for data and AI initiatives. They suggested focusing on stories that illustrate the societal and environmental benefits of these technologies, highlighting the holistic value of data

7. **Local and community perspectives:** Community organisations advocated for greater inclusion of local perspectives in data and AI policy discussions. They pointed to innovative projects using open data at the city level as examples of how data can be used to drive positive change in
communities.

**Looking ahead**

As we move forward, it’s crucial that the government recognises the strengths of different parts of the ecosystem - civil society, academia, research, and business - to help shape the design and implementation of data and AI policies. By leveraging these strengths and working collaboratively, we can build a robust and ethical data-driven future for the UK.

The discussions at our roundtable highlighted the complex and interconnected nature of the challenges we face. From ensuring transparency and accountability in AI systems to addressing environmental concerns and promoting inclusive design, there is much work to be done.

However, these challenges also present opportunities. By fostering a diverse and inclusive data ecosystem, improving data literacy across society, and supporting trusted, independent organisations, we can create an environment where data and AI truly serve the public good.

The ODI will work constructively with the government, other civil society organisations, big and small tech, and other stakeholders to achieve these goals. Together, we can create a thriving data and AI ecosystem that benefits people, the environment, and the economy, turning the aspirations outlined in our Policy Manifesto into reality.

*For more insights and detailed recommendations, read the ODI’s Policy Manifesto and our latest white paper on building a better future with data and AI.*