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At the Trento Festival of Economics, a conversation on data as power and the call for Europe to rethink its role (amid AI, broken norms, and a new social contract still to be defined) took center stage

Who Owns the Future? Europe, Data, and the New Digital Order

At the 20th edition of the Trento Festival of Economics, the panel titled "Data Colonizers" delved into Europe's position in the global landscape. The discussion featured prominent figures including Alberto Barachini, Undersecretary to the Prime Minister with responsibility for Information and Publishing; Marco Trombetti, Co-Founder and CEO of Translated; Silvia Castagna, social analyst and member of the AI Commission for Information at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers; Jannis Kallinikos from LUISS University; and it was moderated by Claudio Antonelli, Deputy Director of La Verità.

The rise of data colonialism marks a shift in global power structures, where data is extracted, managed, and monetized by a few dominant tech companies, reshaping democratic processes and societal norms. This concentration raises urgent questions about digital sovereignty, transparency, and the role of platforms; as Europe begins to assert itself with laws addressing deepfakes and AI governance, the debate intensifies around who controls data and how it is used. The challenge lies not only in protecting personal data but also in rethinking the social contract, fostering distributed governance, and ensuring technology evolves within ethical, human-centered frameworks.

Alberto Barachini stated that data is now a power tool that can influence how and where information is consumed. “News”, he argues, “is a fragile and impactful product, and must be protected. These companies are acting as editors without editorial responsibility”. Supporting the publishing sector, once seen as eccentric, is now becoming a model. **Silvia Castagna** highlighted how the ecosystem itself is fragmenting: on one side, traditional publishers; on the other, private individuals and aggregators who monetize attention without producing news. “The data is us”, she warns. **Marco Trombetti** traced this disruption back to language itself. Starting from translation models, AI evolved into Q&A systems trained on the top 1% of internet content. “We broke the internet”, he says, noting the shift to a model where AI absorbs and learns from interaction itself. **Jannis Kallinikos** sees in this a deeper change in the social contract: data is the outcome of designed engagement, where platforms shape the economic organization. In this distributed, contingent system, only distributed governance can hold.

Speakers highlighted that the first wave of AI training may be over, but the conversation is only just beginning. While the foundations were laid without much oversight, there is now a growing awareness that regulation must catch up. And yet, as AI begins to learn through interaction, the nature of data itself is shifting. It will no longer be a matter of what data we have, but of how we choose to shape the systems that learn from it, and whether we can still steer them in line with the values we wish to protect.

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