



Data is not the new oil, it is much more important than that.

In a little over hundred years, oil created the conditions for a 20th Century economic boom. From the car to the diesel train, to ships that ply our oceans; oil has created the means by which people and goods are transported globally. It has allowed us to explore our world in ways which our 19th century ancestors could only dream about. Thanks to oil, we travel further, trade freely and link economies in a global enterprise.

Like oil, data has been applied in virtually all industries, whether that be Finance, Retail, Emergency Services, Utilities, Travel and Transport, Health and Life Sciences or Manufacturing. It is democratising and transforming opportunities for all, creating the bedrock for Artificial Intelligence and Process Automation. Data is creating new digital businesses and transforming legacy businesses in a way that oil did in the first years of its commercial use. Amazon, Uber, digital banking, digital shopping, applications, would all be impossible without the harnessing of massive amounts of data and the ability to make real time decisions and recommendations that can enhance people's lives. We are only at the beginning of this journey as we think of new possibilities that Artificial Intelligence and automation bring to our use of data, which in turn brings new thinking on the way we manipulate and store data for constant interactive use. Creating, in essence, a more effective world.

Is data the new oil? Certainly, that potential for widespread transformation is observed in data, as is the increasing desire for and consumption of it by governments, companies, and individuals alike. Oil, however, is a finite resource that is not universally accessible to all. The acquisition of oil is a zero-sum game, sparking conflict and competition and handing disproportionate wealth and power to the few who own the reserves. We should consider oil's legacy; as we today are incredulous at our ancestors traveling great distances by horse, I am sure in 100 years' time our descendants will wonder how we could cause so much damage by our incessant search for – and drilling and consumption of – oil.

By contrast, data is not a finite resource; it can be widely shared and consumed repeatedly without depriving others of the chance to benefit from it in the process. Data is also a sustainable resource, and it has the power to drive good outcomes with fewer negative impacts on the world for this century and beyond. Electric cars today can be autonomous through the power of data. Data gives us the ability to create and test digital twins, without the cost of expensive building and potential failure, and indeed can save millions of £s and alter lives. Data's environmental impact is relatively small, and indeed, we can use data to test alternatives for oil.

Data however, like oil, has potential for harm as well. The growth and maintenance of increasingly large and powerful, power-hungry data centres further begs the question of what our acquisition of data means for our impact on the planet. Unlike oil, though, data's downsides are not an inevitable by-product of the core resource. Rather, it is the misuse of data than can do harm, and to counter this, data security must be the number one priority for custodians everywhere. This is a known risk and must be managed accordingly. Hopefully, current thinking is driving us towards how we can use it to its best advantage for societal change more than just another industrial evolution. Sustainability is at the top of most corporate and government agendas today, driven by evidence of the harm we are causing our planet.

Good data management and its operational application gives us the opportunity to save lives, improve our health and security, save costs, increase revenues, improve automation of cumbersome processes, increase mobility etc. These advantages should always outweigh security issues, and to lose the value of data because of poor security would almost be a criminal act.

In our view, it is wrong and somewhat indolent to say that “data is the new oil”, it really is much more important than that, and we believe the operationalising of data and harnessing through analytics, stands alongside the wheel or the written word as a “creator of possibilities”. It's up to us all of us to make this true.

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