DATA&SOCIETY

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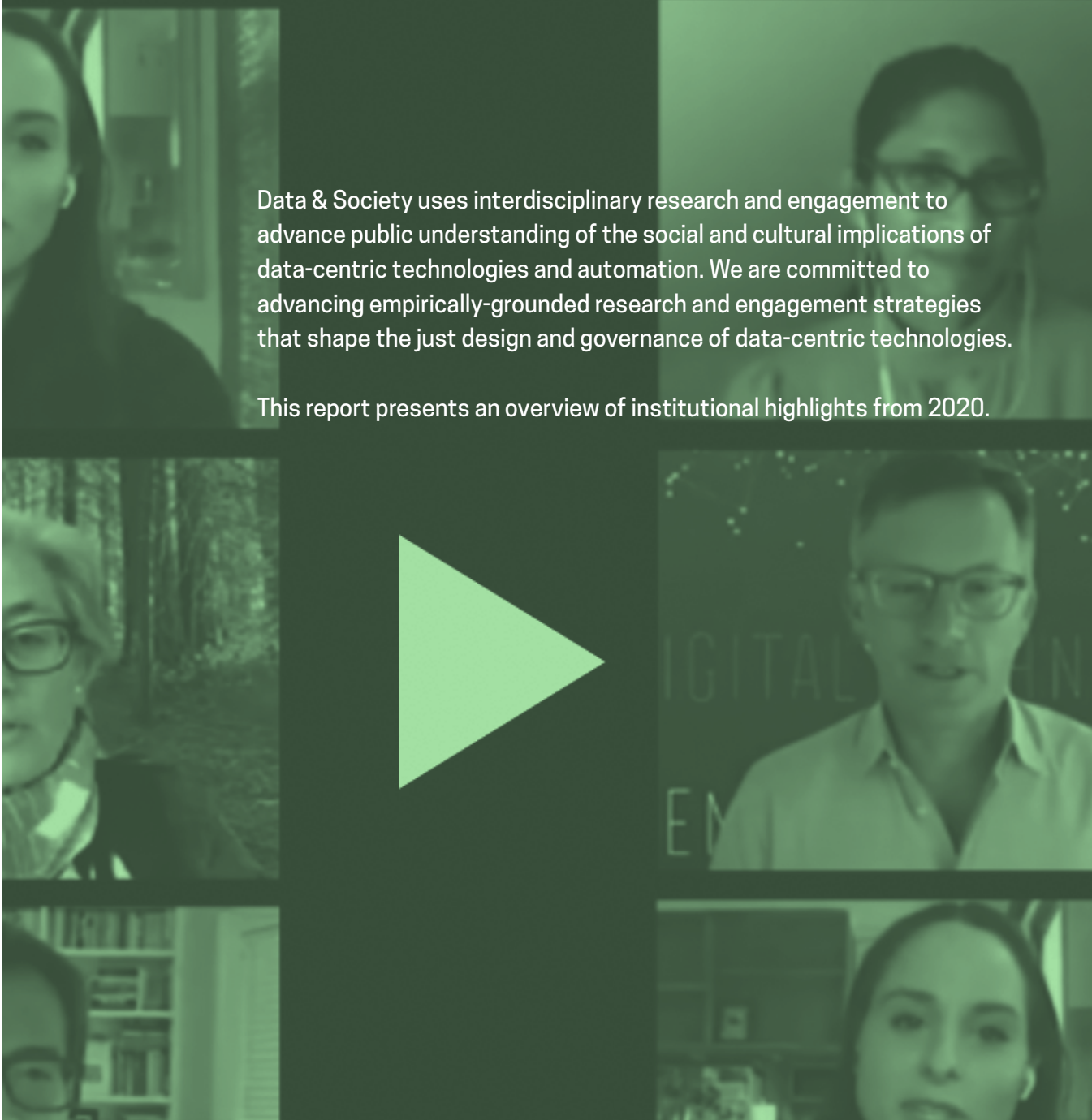
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MISSION AND INTRO

Mission and Intro

Data & Society uses interdisciplinary research and engagement to advance public understanding of the social and cultural implications of data-centric technologies and automation. We are committed to advancing empirically-grounded research and engagement strategies that shape the just design and governance of data-centric technologies.

This report presents an overview of institutional highlights from 2020.

LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Letter from the Executive Director

Dear Friends,

Throughout a year of unprecedented challenge, uncertainty and change, I am so grateful for our community. With the dedication of our staff, our broader network, and our supporters, we have been able continue our work and expand our programming to respond to the emerging and urgent needs of our rapidly evolving field.

Data & Society's mission is to ensure the just governance of new technologies. Datacentric technologies have social, cultural, and political implications that are farreaching, unevenly distributed, and poorly understood. And where there are harms, research has shown that they disproportionately impact systematically marginalized groups, further entrenching inequality and limiting opportunity.

We believe empirical research is a first, crucial step to building an evidence base for just governance of data-centric technology. But research alone is not sufficient: we also need **strategies for change**. Just governance of technologies begins with research grounded in broad expertise. It also must be clear and actionable. That's why, at Data & Society, we prioritize elevating both rigorous research *and* engagement to inform and change policy, on-the-ground practice, and broader narratives that advance a nuanced, grounded framework for just governance of technology.

The outsize concentration of power -- in data collection, computing power, talent, and wealth -- in private industry will continue to challenge democratic practice and governance that should be designed in the public interest. Our work provides an evidence base to challenge existing power dynamics, and center the experiences and perspectives of historically marginalized groups and geographies.

In 2020, our work became even more global in reach and ambition. Our AI on the Ground initiative built a transnational network of stakeholders working to define what real algorithmic accountability means. We expanded our research on trusted data infrastructures to develop community-centric security practices that can establish "trust and safety" as a real condition of life. Our research on

platform governance and verification deepened to encompass its implications for communities worldwide in partnership with an international network of researchers. Our Labor Futures team used empirical research to define new rights for workers in data-centric work environments.

Going forward, our work will advance strategies for changing how data-centric technologies are understood and governed in society. Our researchers are exploring urgent and timely topics like:

- What constitutes citizenship and democratic practice when nation states govern via algorithm?
- How do we define and demand meaningful participation of affected communities in the governance of data-centric and automated technologies?
- How do we put people and the public interest, rather than nationalist technosolutionism, at the center of debates about technology's role in society?

Join us in creating the future we want.

Janet Haven
Executive Director, Data & Society

PEOPLE

People

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

danah boyd
Founder and President of the Board,
Data & Society; Partner Researcher,
Microsoft Research

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Co-Founder and Executive Director,
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Dan Bouk
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Michele Gilman

People

All of this wouldn't be possible without our incredible network of staff, researchers, fellows, affiliates, advisors, and directors.

Thank you all

VALUES

INDEPENDENCE

is the foundation of rigorous empirical research. We select our projects, choose methodologies, and make publishing decisions based on our analysis of the issues at hand. We have specific requirements for accepting funding, and do not accept support that would compromise the independence or rigor of our work.

INTEGRITY

Organizational integrity requires trust, accountability, and transparency. We build trust and accountability through our independent research, our transparent funding relationships and organizational practices, and our inclusive outreach to a wide range of communities and individuals.

EQUITY

Individuals and their communities require respect and dignity. We recognize and embrace differences among us, and center these differences because of a fundamental respect for diversity and a desire to challenge existing power relations in data-centric fields. True commitment to this value requires equitable practices of hiring and retention, a centering of community experiences in our research, and an adherence to the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion in all organizational activities and policies.

CREATIVITY

Non-traditional approaches are necessary to challenge existing structures of power and dominant narratives about data-centric technologies. Thus, we support interdisciplinary work. We enable research and engagement that values new forms of knowledge production, open experimentation, and a broad range of expertise to frame our culture and outputs.
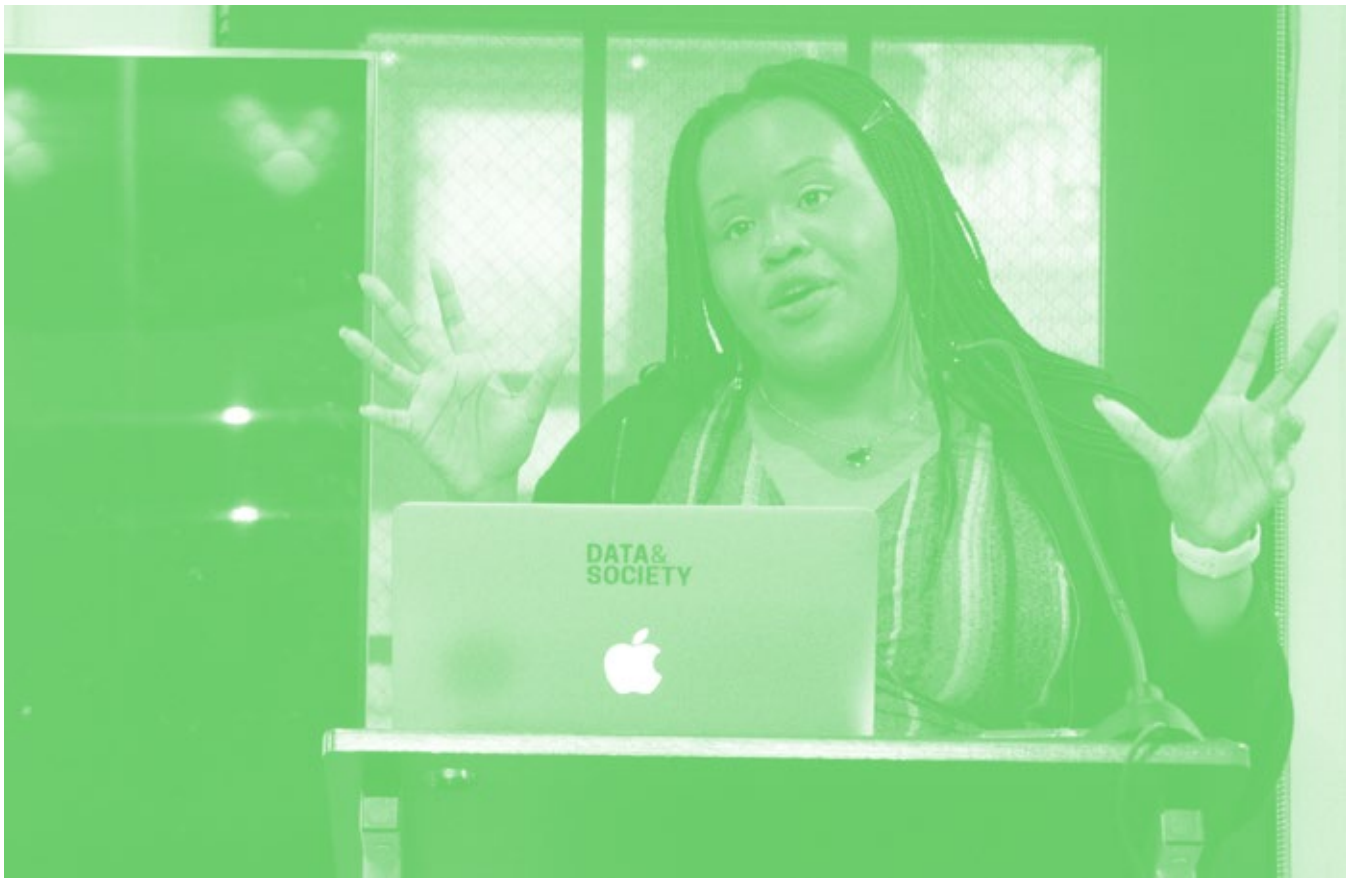
THEORY OF CHANGE

Theory of Change

Our work is animated by these core concerns:

> 1. Data-centric technologies have social, cultural, and political implications that are far-reaching, unevenly distributed, and poorly understood.

> 2. Negative impacts of these technologies disproportionately cause harm to systemically marginalized populations.

> 3. Concentration of power in the technology industry, driven by the amassing of personal data by private companies, has significant implications for practicing democracy and governing data-centric technologies in relation to citizenship and human rights.

We want our work at Data & Society to advance strategies for change in how data-centric technologies are understood and governed in society.

Over 2020, our research was organized into four tracks:

AI ON THE GROUND, which develops robust analyses of AI systems; effectively assesses the impact of AI systems; and informs their future design, use, and governance;

LABOR FUTURES, which focuses on structural inequalities to analyze how technology is disrupting, destabilizing, and transforming many aspects of the labor force; and

HEALTH & DATA, which analyzes the unintended consequences of health data collection, equitable outcomes in data-centric approaches to health, and what constitutes healthy behavior in the context of technology use.

THE DISINFORMATION ACTION LAB, which forges new approaches to address the complex dynamics underpinning the spread of propaganda and disinformation.

We also produced research and engagement around our emerging research projects, including **platform governance, sociotechnical security**, and **AI in the Global South**.

OUR IMPACT

We want to see our work have impact in three ways:

CHANGING THE TERMS OF DEBATE
Challenge techno-solutionist narratives in policy and media environments, and pushing more nuanced accounts about the role of technology in society.

SHIFTING POWER
Foreground historically affected communities in the design and governance of data-centric technologies, including by offering alternatives to dominant structures.

SHAPING POLICY AND PRACTICE IN DATA GOVERNANCE
Inform emerging data governance in policy and practice with a rigorous, interdisciplinary evidence base drawn from empirical research.

Our work bridges the gap between empirical social science research and real world outcomes. The impact stories that follow are drawn from our ongoing body of work over the past year. These four were chosen to illustrate the breadth of our work, and the variety of approaches we're taking within these impact pillars to increase our quantitative impact.

We are not content to simply diagnose the issues and problems we see where society and technology intersect; we are taking action.

Forging a New Practices for Protecting Public Interest Data

Data & Society's Disinformation Action Lab (DAL) reconceptualized how to protect data infrastructures by understanding mis- and disinformation as a network problem that requires a networked response.

Every 10 years, the United States undertakes a count of all of its residents. This includes citizens and non-citizens, as the U.S. census is intended to provide an accurate count of all people living in the country in order to apportion federal resources and representation in the U.S. House of Representatives. Through its work protecting the 2020 U.S. Census, Data & Society's Disinformation Action Lab created a model for securing data infrastructures that now serves as a benchmark for other organizations to use to protect their own data regimes.

DATA & SOCIETY

Balancing Data Utility and Confidentiality in the 2020 US Census

A LIVING DOCUMENT BY
danah boyd

This paper is crafted as a living document, capturing the changes to the conflict over confidentiality in the 2020 US Census. It records an evolving set of responses and actions over time, and will be updated as new information becomes public.

THIS VERSION LAST UPDATED ON APRIL 27, 2020

Balancing Data Utility and Confidentiality in the 2020 US Census by danah boyd, *Data & Society*, May, 2020.

Forging a New Practices for Protecting Public Interest Data

Major impacts of this work:

- We helped build the capacity of census stakeholders to neutralize Census disinformation, and supported the ability of the Census Operation Center (COC), a rapid-response unit created within the Census Counts campaign, to address incidents of misinformation and disinformation in a networked manner.

- We built a networked model of disinformation resistance and resilience that we have shown is replicable.

- We influenced public sector agencies, including the Census Department and members of the incoming Biden administration, to conceive of and engage with disinformation as a sociotechnical problem with social solutions.

- We released a report, **Balancing Data Utility and Confidentiality in the 2020 US Census** by danah boyd, that explains how differential privacy works in the context of the US Census, and illuminates key conversations, misunderstandings, and anxieties surrounding this disclosure avoidance system.

- Validating the impact of our 2020 Census work, DAL earned the inaugural **CIP Award for Excellence** from the University of Washington's Center for an Informed Public.

Drawing on empirical research with tech industry workers, Data & Society is building out a set of guidance intended both to demonstrate the limitations of industry-governed ethics approaches, and point to specific steps that companies can take to correct design and governance principles not grounded in evidence.

Major impacts of this work:

▪ Our research and engagement challenges popular narratives of tech solutionism, and reconsiders the narrative of tech companies as all-powerful keyholders of the pathways to change. In our short report, <u>Good Intentions, Bad Inventions: Four Myths of Healthy Tech</u>, we dispel the common myths about our overall relationship to technology and "addiction.

Ethics Owners, Jacob Metcalf and Emanuel Moss, *Data & Society*, September, 2020.

Data Governance in Policy and Practice

- Data & Society is a founding member of a **Platform Governance Research** Network working with researchers and institutions around the worldto coalesce a global conversation about platform governance, while highlighting underrepresented groups and disciplines.

- In **Ethics Owners: A New Model of Organizational Responsibility in Data-Driven Technology Companies,** Data & Society researchers Emanuel Moss and Jacob Metcalf assert that understanding the work of ethics owners—and the tensions they face—is key to the future governance and regulation of tech companies, as well as the increasingly powerful technologies they design.

Race and Technology

Data & Society first foregrounded racial and economic justice with our early research and a convening to help spark the field of data and civil rights in 2014. In response to the past year's uprisings for racial justice across the United States, we are continuing to deepen our commitment to advance equity in tech, both through building out an intentional theme in our research centering race and technology, and through engagement work that helps to seed a network of scholars and practitioners focused on the ways in which data-centric technologies can perpetuate racism in the US and worldwide.

Major impacts of this work:

- Throughout 2020, we released a slate of programming oriented around tech and racial justice. One of our most popular events was a Databite on Metrics, Media, and Race with Angèle Christin and Joseph Torres, and facilitated by our founder danah boyd.

- As a longstanding member of the Leadership Conference's Civil Rights, Technology and Privacy table, which brings together national civil rights organizations, movement organizations, and tech policy groups, our Executive Director Janet Haven worked closely with Table colleagues on drafting and launching the 2020 principles for Civil Rights in an Era of Big Data. These principles center equity and justice as core concerns for the coming decade of governance work on data-centric technologies.

- Our outgoing Director of Research, Sareeta Amrute, is a co-editor of a special issue in the journal Catalyst on computing and the Global South, and has joined the advisory board of New York University's Center for Critical Race and Digital Studies.

- Two scholars in our 2020-2021 class of faculty fellows, Meredith D. Clark and Shaka McGlotten, researched how technology can contribute to racism and racial hierarchies, and how data-centric technologies can be questioned and improved when we turn to Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities.

Over 2020, our events staff changed their operating model and moved all of our events to virtual convenings. Advantages of an all-virtual format included expanding the geographic range of our audiences, enabling unique breakout and interpretation features, and including more speakers and participants who would otherwise not be able to participate. We adapted to this increase in scale by timing select events so that they can be accessed at a reasonable hour for audiences around the world. These programs include our **Databites series, academic workshops, network events**, and events in collaboration with our partners.
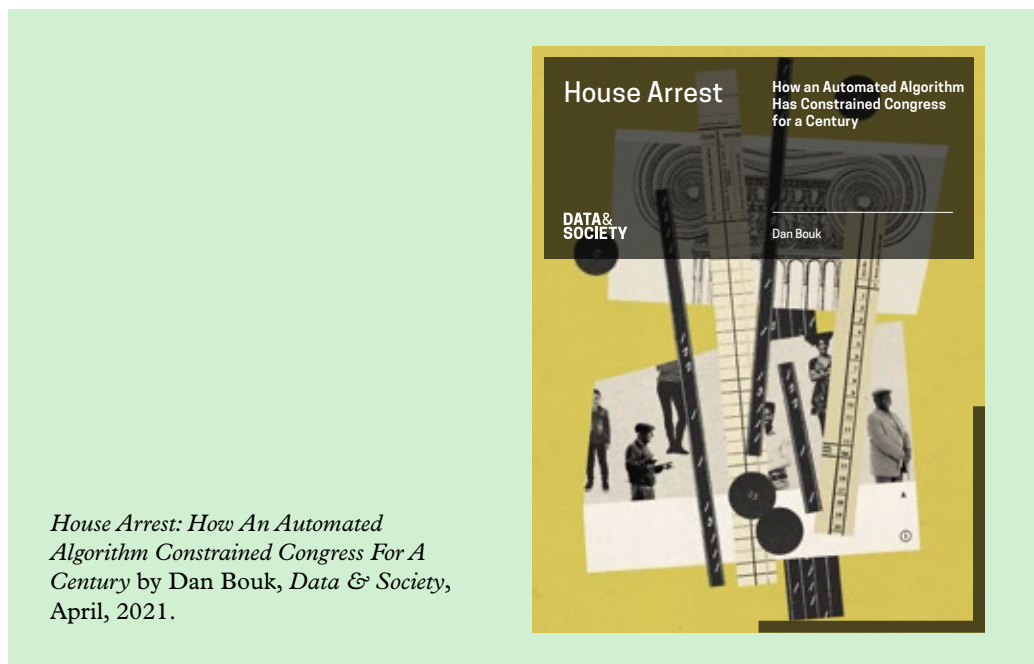
Responsive virtual programming included:

- In **Disruption and Repair: Integrating AI in Clinical Care**, Madeleine Clare Elish, co-author of **Repairing Innovation: A Study of Integration AI in Clinical Care Repairing Innovation**, spoke with Nurse Practitioner Dina Sarro and Innovation Program Manager William Ratliff about their experiences integrating AI systems into hospital operations, and the critical role nurses play to make the system work.

- In **Electionland Misinformation**, Data & Society Senior Research Analyst Cristina López G. spoke with ProPublica editor and reporter Ryan McCarthy at a critical juncture for US media in October 2020. They shared reporter-focused recommendations for holding companies accountable, protecting voting rights, and stopping the spread of false election result claims.

- In their talk **Governing an Algorithm in the Wild**, Scientist and Researcher David Robinson and Data & Society Senior Researcher Alex Rosenblat discuss algorithmic governance, with particular regard given to the argument that members of the public should be more directly involved in deciding the moral tradeoffs entailed by algorithmically-derived systems of control.

- Data & Society partnered with **Rede Mocambos** to launch **"Computing From/In the Global South,"** a special Catalyst issue exploring the distinctive manifestations of technical politics in the Global South. Our outgoing Director of Research, Sareeta Amrute, is the co-editor of this edition.

Fellowships

Since our launch in 2014, Data & Society has hosted a variety of practitioners and academics: data scientists and engineers, lawyers and librarians, ethnographers and creators, historians and activists. Three of Data & Society's faculty fellows who finished with us in 2020 made significant contributions to our research:

- Fellow **Anita Say Chan** worked on data justice networks and research collectives in the global Americas and explored their shared genealogies with feminist data methods developed at the turn of the century. They also worked with collaborating authors to release a <u>Feminist Data Manifest-No</u>, which refuses harmful data regimes and commits to new data futures.

- Fellow and legal scholar **Michelle Gillman** released Poverty Lawgorithms, which details the way emerging AI systems are impacting vulnerable populations through U.S. civil courts on a wide range of issues, including access to housing and public benefits. Adding to the growing body of research on the way algorithms impact criminal justice systems, <u>this report gained particular attention</u> for its focus on increasing the digital literacy of lawyers in the under-researched area of civil law.


House Arrest: How An Automated Algorithm Constrained Congress For A Century by Dan Bouk, *Data & Society*, April, 2021.

▪ Dan Bouk worked on his report W **House Arrest: How An Automated Algorithm Constrained Congress for a Century**, revealing how an automated algorithm implemented in the 1930s has led to an imbalance of power in Congress which lasts to this day. These findings are particularly relevant in an election year, as the census seeks to ensure that seats in the US House of Representatives will be correctly apportioned.

A recording of their **Fellows Talks is also available here**.

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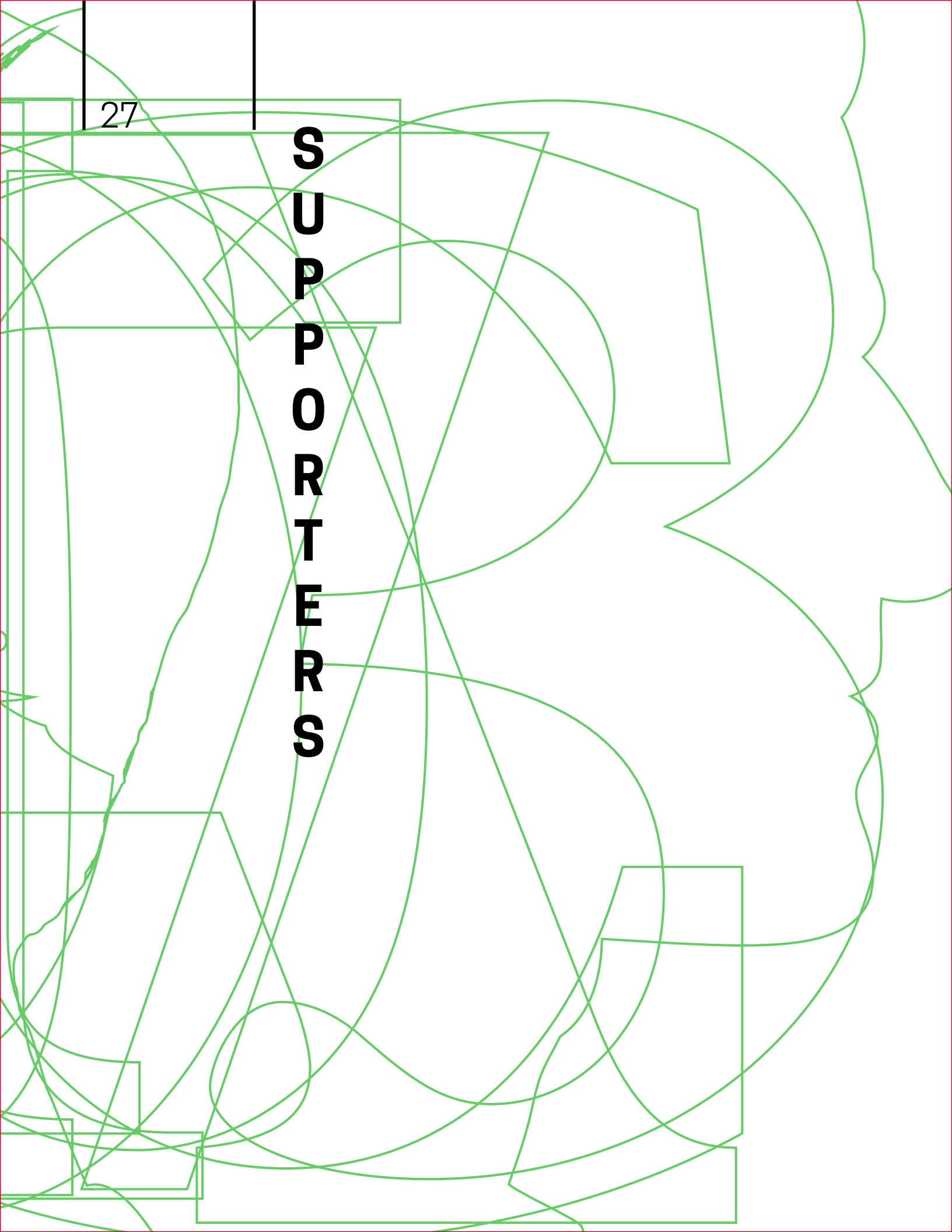
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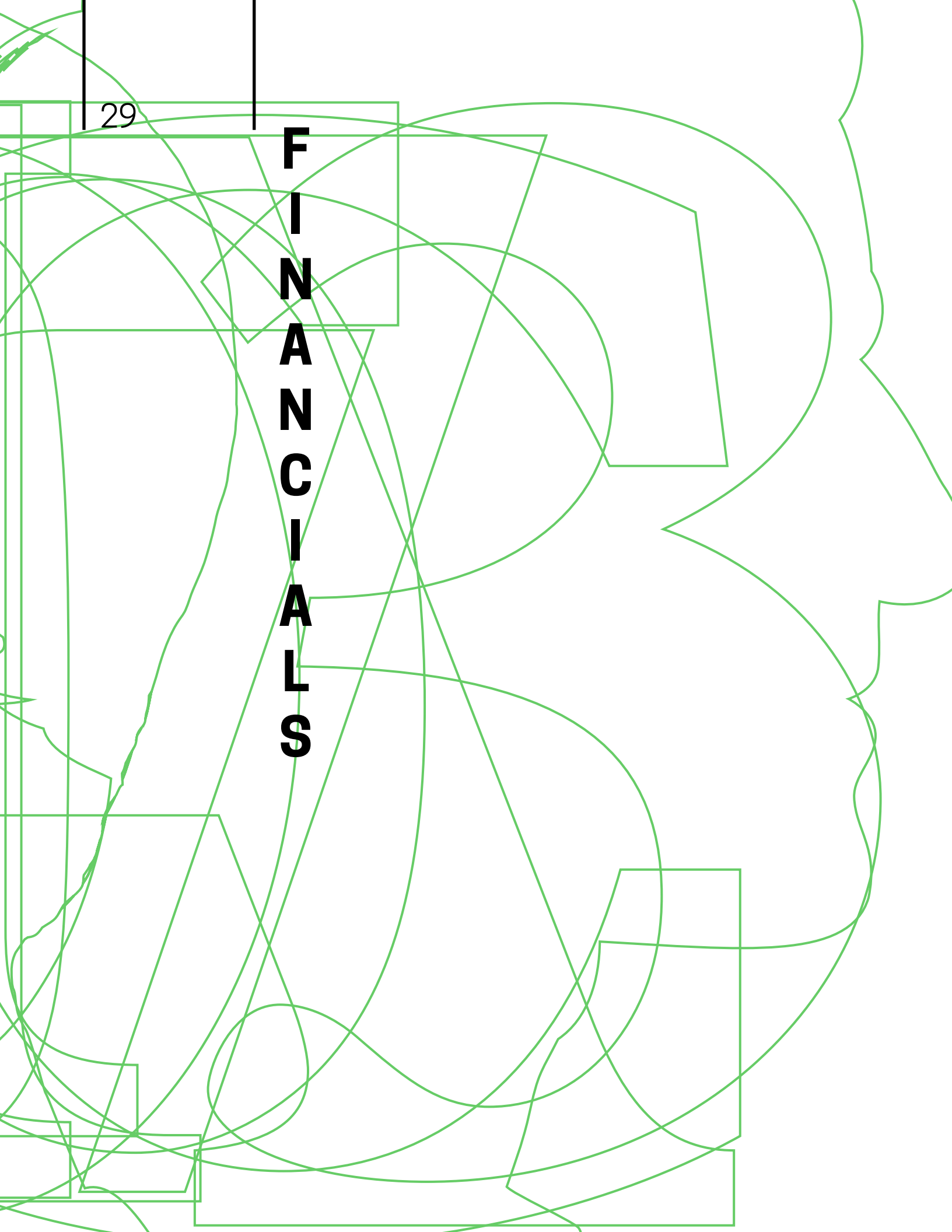
Financials

Adhering to our values of integrity and independence we publish our 990s and audited financial statements annually on **our website**. Data & Society welcomes questions about our sources of funding and allocation of resources.
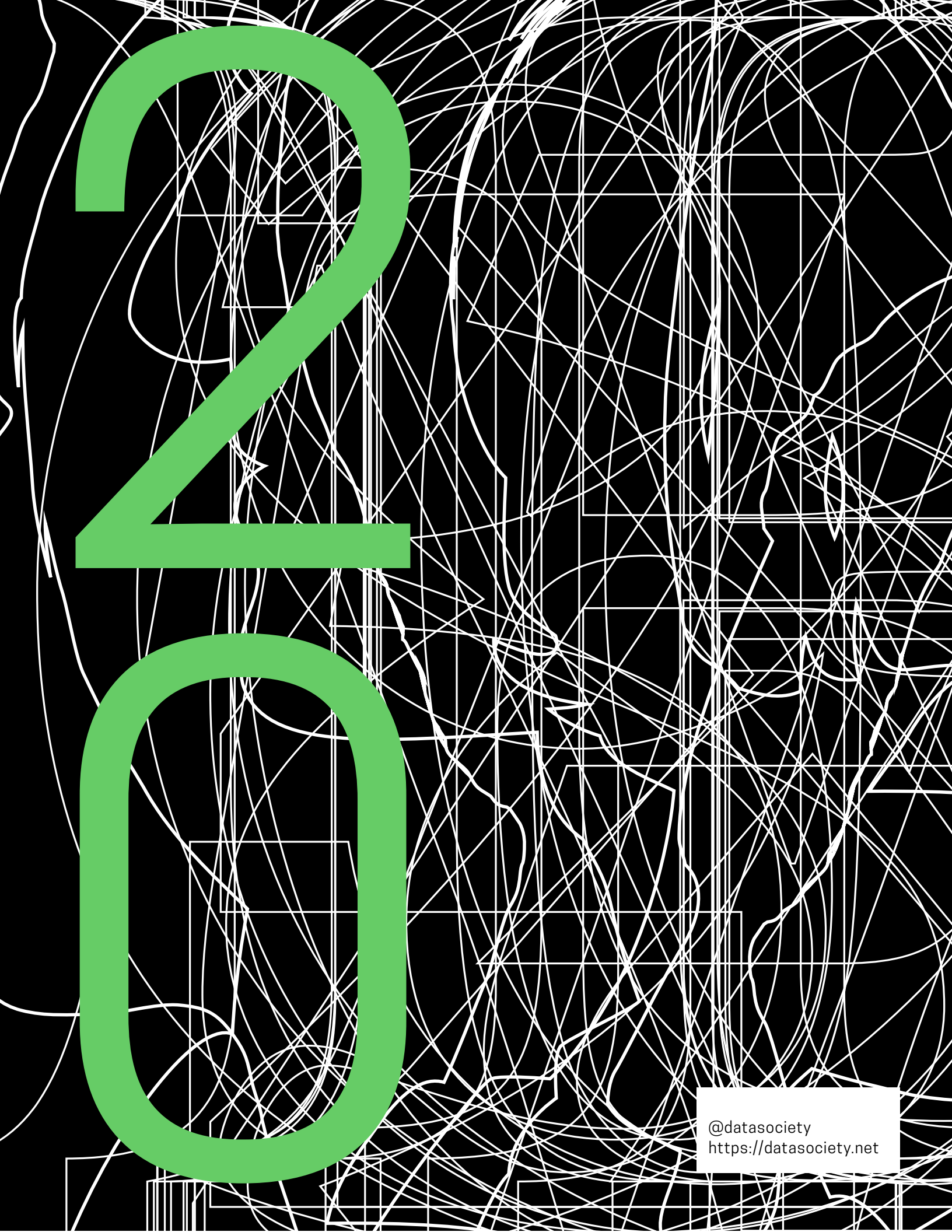
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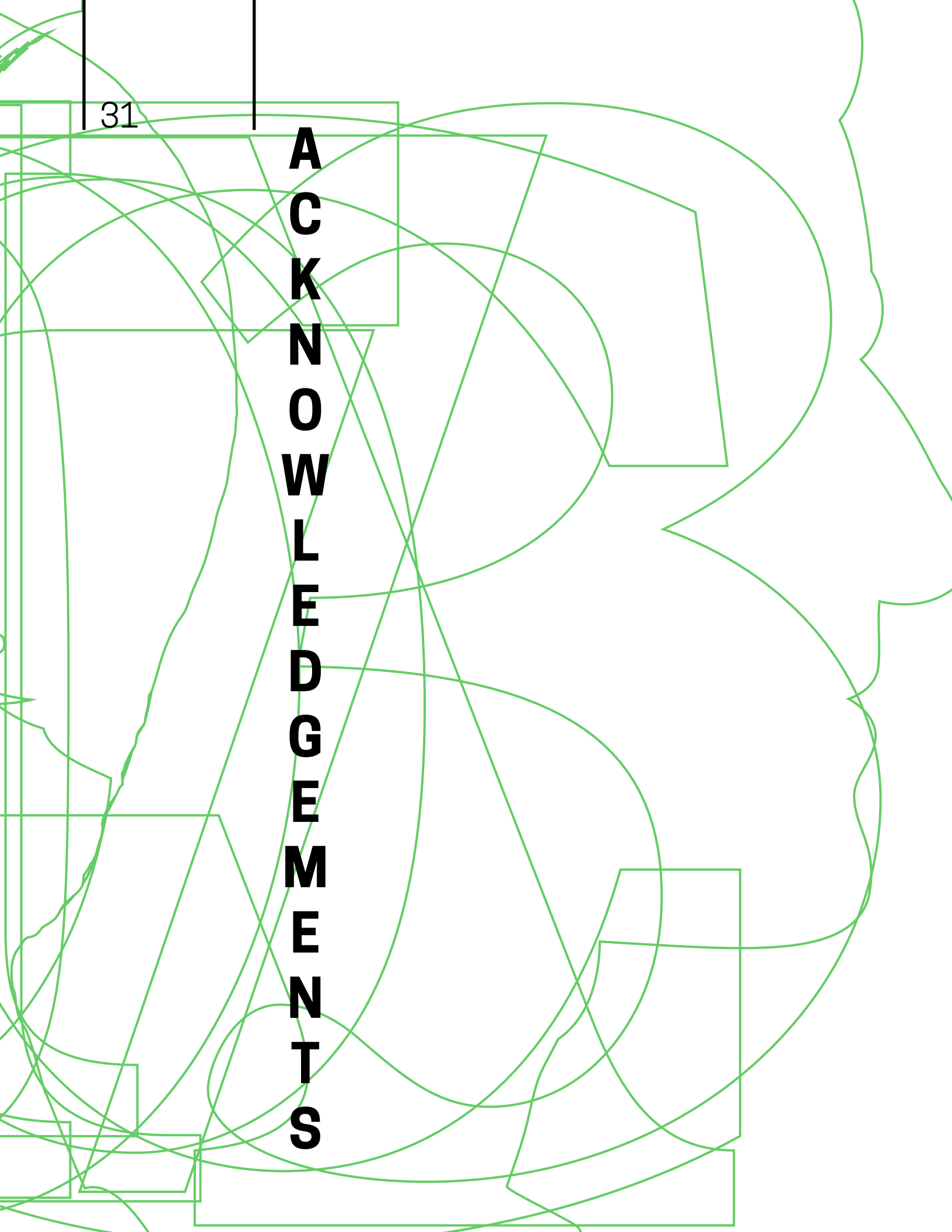
Acknowledgments

2020 saw a world-historical crisis as the COVID-19 pandemic swept the globe, leading for many to unprecedented instability and change, loss and isolation. Data & Society's staff and community, like many, lost family members and friends, moved rapidly to remote work, and grappled with uncertainty and grief, separated from loved ones and colleagues. We are deeply grateful to everyone on our staff, board and in our wider community for continuing our important work of research, engagement and connection in the face of so many personal and societal challenges.