

# Empowerment or Surveillance? Exploring the Discourse on Personal Data Stores

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In the face of mounting concerns over privacy violations and exploitative data practices, Personal Data Stores (PDS) have emerged as a solution promising greater control over personal data. Yet, the potential of PDS to truly challenge informational power asymmetries remains under scrutiny. Our discourse analysis of 29 active PDS reveals a complex landscape where the empowerment narrative coexists with underlying surveillance tendencies.

We identify three distinct discourse types among PDS: the economic discourse, which frames data as an economic asset under individual control, the digital mirror discourse, which emphasizes self-reflection and personal data empowerment, and the critical discourse, which advocates for stringent data minimization to challenge datafication processes. Each discourse offers a unique approach to managing personal data, reflecting varied underlying values and objectives.

This presentation delves into how PDS conceptualize the role of individuals in data ecosystems, the politics of datafication, and the inherent value of data. Our analysis suggests that while PDS aim to empower users, they also risk perpetuating the very dynamics of surveillance capitalism they seek to overcome. The economic discourse, in particular, tends to reinforce data commodification, whereas the critical discourse offers a counter-narrative by prioritizing data minimization and challenging the status quo.

To navigate these complexities, we propose an intersective approach to data governance. By integrating participatory mechanisms such as data cooperatives, PDS could balance individual empowerment with broader social needs, potentially reshaping data practices in more ethical and equitable ways.

Our findings prompt a reevaluation of the initial optimism surrounding PDS. They compel us to ask: Can governance and business models within data ecosystems be aligned in a manner that truly benefits individuals without compromising their autonomy or perpetuating existing power imbalances?

Contact: [sander.vandamme@ugent.be](mailto:sander.vandamme@ugent.be)