Privacy & Power in Ads, Elections and Intelligence: Field notes from two early ventures.

As of this writing, four out of five of the world's most valuable companies earn their profit by expanding private sector capacity to collect, store and process individual demographic and behavioral data. This data is monetized via promises to sway economic behavior with consumer intelligence. In the most recent multi-billion-dollar US presidential election, a record 100 million dollars was paid to single firm for combining public and private data into dossiers of staggering completeness on all ~260 million Americans eligible to vote. This contract was executed for the express purpose of swaying political behavior with voter intelligence.

What these developments have in common is that user data generates enormous wealth and power, while users themselves sit on neither side of the transaction. A designer by training, I seem to leave a trail of sticky notes everywhere I go asking some version of the same question, "How might we put the user in the center of the political and economic transactions of their own data?"

Despite often getting short shrift in ideological debates about capital ownership and democratic rights, the structures of control of information have quietly undergirded both political and economic power for centuries. Happily, in 2020, these structures and their principal operators have become prominent fixtures of public conversation.

So, *how might we* intervene in practical ways to help users protect and leverage the value of their data, while staying cognizant of the institutional nature of the systems we are confronting, as well as the irrevocable nature of data exposure?

In this seminar, I will introduce two modest attempts at intervention through research, design, engineering and entrepreneurship. Outvote, cofounded in 2017, is a consumer-facing mobile app that connects users to public voter registration data. The app streamlines the most-effective strategy users have to leverage this 260M-record public dataset, peer social accountability. FABRK, cofounded in 2019, is developing technologies using federated learning and secure aggregation to manage user data in large-scale social platforms. FABRK hopes to create a marketplace where users can monetize their attention and the intelligence derived from their data without exposing the data itself, or in farmer's parlance, to "sell the milk, but keep the cow."

Bio: Jim Moffet is a technologist and avid life-long learner. He has served variously as an engineer, designer, researcher, artist, product manager and entrepreneur. He spent 5 years hacking bureaucracy at member-governed SEIU, developing user-focused data products and long-term technology strategy. As a Fulbright Fellow in 2014-15, he researched and lectured on civic and privacy-focused technology and education. He has worked as a research manager for MIT's Community Innovator's Lab (CoLab) and studied under Deb Roy, Cesar Hidalgo and Ethan Zuckerman at MIT Media Lab. James completed undergraduate studies in Computer Science at Depaul University in 2005 and a Master's Thesis with Distinction at the Harvard Graduate School of Design in 2018. He was employee #1 at Outvote (Y Combinator Summer '18) and currently serves as CTO and co-founder of FABRK, where he is developing technology for user-owned social media and gig economy platforms.