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Following the Issues: A Political Perspective on Google's Data Practices

Google's collection and usage of personal data has been heavily scrutinized by privacy experts, social scientists and philosophers. Issues range from concerns about the amount of data that Google collects, to more fundamental concerns about the manipulative power of Google's personalized technologies. While there has not been a lack of attention for the ethics of Google's data practices, much less attention has been paid to the politics that surround it. So, rather than evaluating how Google's data practices interact with human values and shape our relations, this paper instead aims to describe how issues are dealt with, what issues are taken up by Google and policymakers, and how outside actors are able to shape Google's data practices.

In this paper, I will present the results of interviews that I have conducted with Google employees, civil society organizations and policymakers. Through these interviews, and a supplementary document analysis, I gained insight into how issues make it onto the agendas of Google and policymakers, how Google is able shape the articulation and settlement of issues, and what issues end up unattended to. I will show that pragmatist theories of democratic politics can help us evaluate whether this political situation constitutes a democratic deficit and how we should organize society to improve the articulation and settlement of issues.