

Big Data: Public views on the use of private sector data for social research: The CDRC Response

The Consumer Data Research Centre (CDRC) welcomes this independent and impartial report, and the insight it generated through discussion around the use of private data from private sector organisations for research purposes. The CDRC welcomed the opportunity provided by the events for its Directors (Professor Paul Longley and Professor Mark Birkin) to interact with the general public, to present the Centre's work and to discuss the potential impact of conducting social research using private sector data.

Following the public dialogues, in recognition of the importance and value of interacting and engaging with public, the CDRC has appointed a public member drawn from the dialogues exercise to sit on the CDRC Advisory Board. This member will play a part in ensuring that the views of the general public are represented in the Centre's decision making in the use of private data for research purposes.

The Centre believes that the report's Executive Summary gives a message that is broadly positive, whilst acknowledging the public's legitimate concerns. It provides sound recommendations for the Big Data Network 2 (BDN2) Centres to take forward.

Key Messages

The Centre was reassured by the fact that the dialogue demonstrated that "there is wide public support for the use and re-use of private sector data for social research." (p. 35) The Centre feels that the following high level points that arose through the Public Dialogues were particularly relevant and should be at the heart of its communications with the general public:

- Data about consumers are being generated on a daily basis by businesses. They are used to help organisations operate efficiently, but need not benefit businesses alone. Use by other researchers can enable projects that have a positive impact on society.
- The dialogues on the use and re-use of private sector data for social research demonstrated that the public is generally unaware of the concept of Big Data or what social research is. CDRC will seek to increase awareness of their value to society.
- The Centre serves the interests of society and so its research activities should be communicated to the wider public, in order to demonstrate the value of its work. These research activities are carried out by academics principally because of their scientific and societal value rather than their potential commercial benefits.
- The best science requires the best data, and the Centre has the expertise to source, manage, maintain and add value to business data as part of the rapidly developing data landscape. Academic researchers act independently of commercial or government interests, and provide impartial views based on robust and transparent research findings.

- The Centre does not sell or make profit from data, and only acquires data for the purpose of research which is of benefit to society.
- Researchers do not seek to ascertain the identities of individuals, but rather are focused upon trends and patterns in society at large. This means that academics do not use information from identifiable individuals or use their data as a means of surveillance.
- Effective safeguards are in place to protect disclosure of individuals identities.

Next steps

The Centre will work with the other Big Data Network 2 (BDN2) Data Centres to agree consistent and readily intelligible messages about the use of private sector data for research purposes. These will be communicated through various channels, and will likely include our websites, public events, and videos. Working with the other Centres, we plan to prepare short (1 page) flyers written for curious enquirers to get the key messages across: we will link the flyers to more detailed existing documents, and Hopkins Van Mil's independent report. These and other activities undertaken by the Centre will:

- **Emphasise how individuals benefit from the use of private sector data for social research.**

We will use case studies written in plain English to demonstrate the value of data and how they can be used to benefit consumers through improved service planning and delivery. These case studies will be communicated through widely used media channels.

- **Improve communication about Data Centre processes and safeguards.**

The report makes clear that participants were reassured by the safeguards that all of the Centres have in place to protect privacy. The CDRC currently communicates these safeguards through its website and other promotional material. It recognises that there is a need to relay some of this information in a way that is more accessible and clearly signposted for the general public.

- **Act as a trusted party for advice on the processing and protection of personal data**

The Centre will provide information on its website to advise the public on best practice in the processing and protection of data, and where to seek advice relating to the 1998 Data Protection Act and related privacy concerns.

More broadly in response to this report, we will be reviewing and revising some existing materials and developing new activities to engage with the public and to highlight the benefits of using private sector data for social science research.