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Data sovereignty: How can we control our personal data?

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About the research

People can make informed choices about how they use and value their personal data. But they need greater understanding of data sharing and ownership first.

The University of Bristol's 'Productive Margins' programme of co-produced research with community organisations and Cardiff University supported 'Women and data futures', a joint project with Knowle West Media Centre (KWMC) in Bristol and 3Gs Community Development Trust (3Gs) in Merthyr Tydfil.

Over the course of six workshops in each location, female participants explored the concept of 'data' – their own, and relating to their local community. Topics included health data and analysis (using the fitness technology band, Jawbone), personal data, 'stalking yourself', targeted advertising, Instagram terms and conditions and data ethics.

Participants worked with artists to create data maps and visualizations, enabling them to better understand their personal data and look at it differently. They also learned about the value of their data and how this could be translated into tangible economic benefits.

The programme of workshops, facilitated by KWMC and supported by three artists, involved a range of creative activities. Finally, both groups came together to reflect, share and discuss the workshops.

'People [are] just taking your information and putting it out there!' (Bristol participant)

'They give all our information to others - that's really wrong!' (Merthyr Tydfil participant)

Policy implications

- Educating people about their personal data should start early in life; schools and other educational establishments should include this in the curriculum such as in PSHE (Personal, Social, and Health Education).

- Online businesses – such as internet service providers, social media companies, hosts and moderators of discussion forums – should make their terms, conditions, data gathering and use policies more accessible.

- Data brokers (who gather and sell personal data), those who buy data from data brokers, and companies such as Google and Facebook, should be more transparent about their processes and enable individuals to identify and delete outdated or inappropriate personal information held online.

- Organisations providing services to local communities (such as local councils) should develop digital interfaces and data handling in consultation with service users and community organisations.

- Organisations developing technology should be informed by and accessible to the needs and priorities of individual citizens and their communities.

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Key findings

- Many people have limited information about how their personal data is used online.

- Participants are concerned about the lack of privacy and how and where their personal information was being shared without their knowledge.

- Participants better understand their personal data and how it is used after learning about cookies, data brokers, targeted advertisements (e.g. on social networking sites).

- Once people understand how their personal data is used, they are able to make more conscious choices to exert greater control, such as turning off Facebook settings.

- Many participants respond positively to the potential for some forms of digital data collection, eg wearable technology, which could help them track health goals.

- By the end of the project participants wanted to share what they had learned with the wider community to help others take control of their data.

The image below shows how we visualised data. Each hand mirror represents one woman's Facebook ad preference data. Four categories of ad preference are represented by the different mirror shards. Larger shards represent more words - and more data being available about the woman.

Further information

The full report of the women and data futures project is available from **Productive Margins**

KWMC is an internationally respected digital arts charity that supports people to use technology and the arts to create positive change in their lives and communities.KWMC works with people to develop projects that explore and tackle issues they care about, from food production and wellbeing to digital literacy. Artists working on this project were Stefanie Posevac, Eliza Lomas, Erica Jewell.

3Gs is a charity and company aiming to enable local people to have a better quality of life by making neighbourhoods cohesive, productive and safe where people can work and thrive together and are proud to belong and contribute to their community.

Contact the researchers

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