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DATA PROTECTION

Ethical Data Collection: Please Have Your Boarding Card Ready



Robert Plant, Associate Professor, School of Business Administration, University of Miami
 8/7/2013
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You know the feeling: You finally made it through security at the airport and you need to fuel up as you're about to board a 10 hour flight with service of an 18th century prison ship.

Last week, I made yet another trip through London's Heathrow airport, and did just this. However, while queuing for sandwiches at a well known sandwich chain, they kept asking for my boarding card. I obliged, and let the assistant scan it. Then, a bit later, I decided to get some water at the nearby news stand, another well-known chain.



The line was huge and the assistant was most insistent that customers produce their boarding pass; which, of course, people with kids, assorted currencies, passports, and handfuls of merchandise were loath to produce, but thinking this was a security issue and that it saved them from terrorists, patrons dutifully obliged.

As my children and friends know, I'm a bit obsessive, and never want to miss the chance to have input from a real live case study, especially one on security and big data, so I stopped the queue and asked the assistant doing all the requesting, "Why do I need to produce this for water? Is it mandatory?"

The answer was a sheepish "no, we are just doing a survey."

Upon receipt of this knowledge, I happily shared it with the other 30 or so passengers waiting to be served, to which there was a unified groan.

Questions of ethics in big data collection

I then asked what the data was going to be used for. Was it part of a database authorized by the data protection act? With whom was it to be shared? What data were they actually collecting -- my flight, my name? Could they link this to my frequent flier number? Clearly, my questions were somewhat unfair as the assistant had not been briefed at this level of detail; he revealed that he was just doing what management had asked. But it made me wonder when a survey just becomes an unethical exercise in big data collection.

Professional researchers such as university professors and those working in medical laboratories are ethically obliged to consider the collection of any data involving human subjects very carefully, ensuring that the subjects' rights are protected and that all involvement is optional; that the subjects can opt out at any time, for any reason; that they are not coerced; and that minors, the elderly, the vulnerable, and even prisoners are treated with respect to their rights.

A history of data abuse

The background to this style of data collection comes directly from the atrocities of the Second World War, where the Nazi party performed experiments on human subjects without their permission. This led to the Nuremberg Code being developed in 1947, and the development of the concept of "required informed consent" by individuals participating in human studies. The code was revised by the United States Government National Institute of Health in the 1950s, and experiments such as the Tuskegee syphilis experiment and the Stanford prison experiment led to further development of the ethical code.

The report that was created is known as the Belmont Report. Based on this report and its ethical principles, all research involving human subjects and obtaining federal funding from the US Government have to have their research study, known as a protocol, approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB). These IRBs are tasked to approve that these studies are established and operated in compliance with Title 21 - Code of Federal regulations part 56, as set out by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, which details all required human subject guidelines, policies, and procedures. Other countries have similar laws, rules, and IRBs.

This level of code of conduct enforcement goes largely unknown by the general public, and may initially seem extraordinary to non-researchers, but it is there to specifically protect them from abusive

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researcher behavior. Codes of Human Subject conduct have three basic principles: Respect for the Person, Beneficence, and Justice.

- *Respect for the Person* has two major ethical components based upon protection of the individual and their need for protection from exploitation and provision of autonomy.
- *Beneficence* has been defined as ensuring that "persons are treated in an ethical manner" not only by respecting their decisions and protecting them from harm, but also by making efforts to secure their well-being and building on the medical Hippocratic creed of "do not harm" and "maximize the benefits while minimizing potential harm."
- *Justice* is designed to ensure that consideration is given to "who ought to receive the benefits of research and who bears the burden?"

While it's not likely that commercial firms, such as the sandwich and newspaper shop, will rise to the level of IRB without a stick, the carrot is the better relationship with consumers. Basing a code of conduct on the Belmont principles would draw a line under the ethical position adopted by any firm and prevent slippage.

One place to start would be the adoption of a position such as that proposed by the [Association of Information Systems](#):

Respect the rights of research subjects, particularly their rights to information privacy, to being informed about the nature of the research and the types of activities in which they will be asked to engage.

From this, a solid ethical framework can then be developed, and a corporate customer charter on data collection can be created, acted upon, and placed within the annual report for all to see. As human subjects become increasingly valuable for their data, the temptation to cross the ethical line will increase, and as such, the onus is on firms to clearly demonstrate they don't cross that line, no matter what. Additionally, it's not a bad thing for customers to ask a few more leading questions. So, next time someone asks you for a boarding card, you may well want to just ask them why!

For a fuller review of the processes involved in human subjects research, [this paper](#) may be a useful starting point.

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Susan Fourtané, User Rank: Blogger
9/2/2013 | 3:42:04 AM

Re: Secret boarding card data
Pradeepta,

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"Ethical data collection should be a norm with pre-determined objectives in mind so that the person whose data is getting stored can be aware of."

That would be ideal. Yet, reality tells this is not always the case. In fact, how many cases of ethical data collection have you encountered?

-Susan

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Pradeepta Mishra, User Rank: Exabyte Executive
8/31/2013 | 7:00:33 AM

Re: Secret boarding card data

Data is money now days; people sale the data collected from any sources regarding the name, contact no and email ID to the marketing agencies. An ordinary individual does not have any idea about what the data collection agencies are doing after their completion of a particular assignment or project. They must be trading it with others. Ethical data collection should be a norm with pre-determined objectives in mind so that the person whose data is getting stored can be aware of.

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Susan Fourtané, User Rank: Blogger
8/16/2013 | 5:08:22 PM

Re: Secret boarding card data
Saul,

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"Always a chance they can link that data up to other stores of data relating to the customer as well"

Yes, that's another possibility. I am flying to London on Monday, and this time I will not lose the opportunity to do a little investigation about that boarding card data collection.

-Susan

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Susan Fourtané, User Rank: Blogger
8/16/2013 | 5:03:42 PM

Re: Holy Cow!
Saul,

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Beverly Hills 90210, the TV show, made it famous, and I guess it's the coolest postcode. :D I suppose when I grew up I stopped using it. Now with all this talk I am tempted to use it again, and maybe I will, just for the fun of it.

Looking forward to the new series of videos featuring my neighbourhood! :D



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Media Pioneer Award Winner

-Susan

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Susan Fourtané , User Rank: Blogger
8/16/2013 | 4:57:08 PM

Re: Holy Cow!
SharCo,

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Yay! Now we can go for Afternoon Tea together in our 90210 neighbourhood. :D That, if we can find a place where they serve Afternoon Tea.

-Susan

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Saul Sherry, User Rank: Blogger
8/14/2013 | 7:56:19 AM

Re: Secret boarding card data

Always a chance they can link that data up to other stores of data relating to the customer as well @Susan.

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Saul Sherry, User Rank: Blogger
8/14/2013 | 7:53:34 AM

Re: Holy Cow!

What is it about that postcode - I just made a series of videos to go live on BDR over the next few weeks and 90210 features prominently! Let's hope the census bureau aren't looking to use that data!

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SharCo, User Rank: Petabyte Pathfinder
8/12/2013 | 1:32:49 PM

Re: Holy Cow!

Lol, I do the same. Hello there, fellow Beverly Hills resident.

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Saul Sherry, User Rank: Blogger
8/12/2013 | 4:35:00 AM

Re: Secret boarding card data

@Ian, interesting that you got a refusal. Reading around online there may be a tax reason at certain airports... the bottom line is there's a lot of confusion among shoppers as well as staff in shops. Clarity is key in earning the trust of customers and for the amount of data they could well be taking, it feels like there's too much obfuscation in this area.

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Susan Fourtané , User Rank: Blogger
8/11/2013 | 2:39:26 AM

Re: Holy Cow!

Robert,

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As a matter of fact, some time ago I used to give 90210 whenever there was a zip code question. I may start doing it again. :D

-Susan

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