

Ethical Data Handling – beyond risk and compliance.

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Abstract: We can all think of instances where we find that data about us has been used in a way that we find surprising, unwelcome, or even harmful. The more our lives are conducted on, or through, online services, the more potential there is for this to happen, and the greater our dependence on the behaviour of other entities over whom we may have little or no control. In that context, how can we optimise the outcomes for ourselves, as individuals, citizens and consumers?

Keywords: Ethics, Data Protection, Privacy, Personal Data, Risk, Compliance

1 Summary

Everything we do online is mediated through at least one third party, and there is usually also a power imbalance between us and the online service providers on whom we rely more and more in our digital lives. As a result, data about us (and data that affects us) is held by many third parties whose interests do not wholly coincide with our own.

In some cases, those entities have a business model predicated on the collection and monetisation of personal data – whether or not that is our primary expectation in signing up for their services. Simply withdrawing from digital life is not an option: even passively-collected data can have far-reaching impacts on our lives, and we cannot realistically avoid its collection.

It is tempting to assume that technology can fix this problem for us („is there an app for that?“) - but experience should tell us that a point solution based on some technical widget will not work.

In this talk, I will suggest that the problems arising from over-collection of personal data are systemic ones, and that therefore no single point solution is likely to succeed. Rather, what is needed is a set of point solutions – the actions of multiple stakeholders, aimed at producing changes at multiple points in the system.

Key amongst these is a shift, in data controllers, from a mentality based on risk and compliance, to a culture of ethical treatment of personal data. I will look at the phases through which technical innovations usually pass, and identify the points at which systemic changes can be applied to improve the over-all outcomes for data subjects.

I will also give examples of the kinds of practical resource that the Internet Society and its partners are identifying and collecting, in order to inform and influence the relevant

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stakeholders.