

White House report embraces 'big data,' privacy rules

May 1 2014, by Rob Lever



Former White House chief of staff John Podesta in Washington, DC, on February 18, 2014

A study ordered by US President Barack Obama and released Thursday concludes that analysis of "big data" can help society in many ways, from improving health care to spurring economic growth.

But the report also said the vast expansion of computer analytics of large data banks creates new threats to [privacy](#), and recommended updated

rules and laws to protect stored information.

"The [big data](#) revolution presents incredible opportunities in virtually every sector of the economy and every corner of society," said John Podesta, a former White House chief of staff who led the Big Data and Privacy Working Group.

Podesta, in a blog post accompanying the report, said "big data is saving lives" by helping analyze trends in disease, infection and caring for babies born prematurely, among other things.

He added that "big data is making the economy work better," for example, by using data from sensors to determine when maintenance is needed for planes and trucks, to manage peak utility demand and avert outages.

The same analytics are being used to make government more efficient and help crack down on fraud in [health care](#).

The report said big data can help the military as well, and cited a project that allowed researchers to more easily locate and destroy improvised explosive devices in Afghanistan.

But Podesta said privacy can be a victim of big data and the [task force](#) said a range of regulations need to be revisited.

The task force urged passage of a so-called "consumer privacy bill of rights," and also said privacy protections should be extended to non-US nationals because of the ability to sweep up data globally.

The report said the [privacy protections](#) of electronic communications should be "consistent with that afforded in the physical world," making it more difficult for government to snoop on email.



The Center for Democracy and Technology headquarters in Washington, DC, on July 16, 2012

Civil liberties and digital rights groups immediately hailed the privacy recommendations in the report.

"The most important takeaway is that our privacy really does matter when it comes to big data," said Nuala O'Connor, president of the Center for Democracy and Technology.

O'Connor said that while big data offers the potential for innovative services, "the government should have to get a warrant to access our email and other personal information stored digitally."

Christopher Calabrese at the American Civil Liberties Union, said:

"Everyone who cares about their privacy should be glad that the president's review group recommends updating ([privacy law](#)) to protect Americans' communications."

John Simpson at the activist group Consumer Watchdog said he was pleasantly surprised by the recommendations.

"I expected the White House team to focus on the benefits of big data and gloss over the very real threats to privacy and liberty it poses," said Simpson.

"Instead they clearly spelled out the dangers."

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