

Don't expect straight answers on data sharing from the firms that profit from it

August 14 2015, by Anya Skatova



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Data is a new currency of sorts: we all generate a lot of it, and many companies already use it to serve their ends or ours. But, for many very good reasons, it's not easy to persuade people that they should give their data away. There are more than enough surveillance scandals or data breaches to make an open approach seem like a bad idea.

A [study](#) commissioned by the Digital Catapult, a working group bringing together academics and industry – and conducted by a credit checking firm – concludes that consumers want new services that will allow them to collect and manage [personal data](#), and that paying people to share their personal data creates new business opportunities.

The report suggests that people are eager to use their own personal data as a means to earn money: a majority of respondents (62%) said that they would be willing to receive £30 per month to share their data. But [respondents](#) could only choose between £2 and £30 per month – there was no option to opt-out and share nothing at all. Of course, if you're facing a choice where you can earn something or nothing for your data that will be hoovered up anyway whether you like it or not, it's hardly surprising that people choose the maximum available. It feels as if the rest who answered otherwise just didn't understand the question.

So, it doesn't mean personal data is worth £30 per month, and nor does it stand up the report's claims of "£15 billion of untapped wealth for UK consumers". This value is arbitrary, plucked out of the air and relative only to the limited choices people were offered. No doubt they'd not turn down £100 or £1,000 either.

The value of data, and to whom

The research I've carried out suggests that it's hard to put a monetary value on personal data sharing – in some circumstances it is possible to estimate how much people are willing to pay to keep the data secure. The difficulty with assessing how much data is worth is because one person's data tends only to gain value when it is aggregated with other people's data. This makes it hard, if not impossible, to decide what a single person's data is really worth – even if some attempts have been made to find a market price.



We carry more information with us than we realise. Credit: ter-burg, CC BY

In fact many people don't really understand what their personal data is, how it is stored and used – and this is something the report backs up. Considering these difficulties, then, is it ethical to use cash incentives to persuade people to hand over their personal data? Do those doing so understand the potential implications, and should those offering the cash be required to explain?

Some stand to profit more than others

Let's not ignore the fact that the study was carried out by a credit

checking firm. The firms' business is based on gathering considerable amounts of personal information from various sources and then selling it on to others, including the same organisations from which they drew the data in the first place and those people who have become records in their systems. They have access to many data sources that describe our lives, such as banking records, our home address, bills with various utility companies and the like. However, there are many other digital pieces of information about us which yet are not shared with credit checking companies.

Perhaps it's no surprise that this report justifies the introduction of services that will allow third parties to collect and manage more of personal data that we produce. For example, a firm might launch a personal data management app that collates mobile phone use, GPS records, loyalty card data, health data from fitness apps and your NHS records, alongside charitable donations, social network data and productivity apps. Then it could offer the opportunity to share some or all of that data with them for a fee, paying you, for example, £30 a month, at which point almost everything about you, from work, physical health, habits and social groups, could be discovered and triangulated, and used by them for their financial benefit.

Risk vs benefits

While the report suggests such services might benefit the public good, the question is of who holds the reins: government, business, or the third sector? Having your data will directly benefit those in control of it, and those they sell or share it with – but would it benefit you?

Time will show whether this degree of data integration is beneficial at all. But given that people understand so little about how their personal data is created, gathered and shared – and the implications of all this – it seems simplistic to offer cash incentives for people to share the

information that describes their lives in detail. That's without even considering the many risks posed by collating so much information on individuals and storing it together – as tales of massive [data breaches](#), losses, and abuses continue to remind us.

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