

Using data to improve public order: Because we can, does that mean we should?

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The collection, analysis, storage and sharing of data has become increasingly popular and important for public institutions. The use of data enhances the capabilities to monitor the environment, as well as groups and individuals. Statistical analysis and algorithms seemingly make prediction and prevention of undesired events possible. Continuous measurement, observation and information sharing enables authorities to work more efficiently adopting prescriptive practices in their work and organisations.

On 11 February of this year the Data Research Centre (DRC) hosted a symposium on this topic in collaboration with NHL Stenden research group on Cybersafety and the Center for Digital Society at Universitas Gadjah Mada. Experts from these three research clusters came together around to discuss the mobilisation of data for various governance purposes: from intervention against those that plan riots in messenger apps to tracking the spread of COVID-19. The digital domain is increasingly operationalised by agencies to maintain public order and keep societies safe, secure and healthy.

[The symposium](#) had 341 registered participants from academia, government, business, media and civil society organisations. The input delivered during the sessions will continue to shape our research agenda for the years to come, more specifically the focus area 'Data Governance, Security and Human Rights'.

From Descriptive to Prescriptive Practices

The participants noted that the use of data does not only bring new opportunities. Recent anti-pandemic measures have demonstrated how both hype and hope are tightly attached to technological ordering of the public sphere, for the maintenance of public goods such as health and mobility. If social interaction is constantly monitored, how can we ensure that individuals move around freely, with sufficient space for freedom of expression and privacy? Furthermore, how can we prevent that digital tools are used to commit crime, for cyberattacks, fraud, or for attempts to undermine social norms and institutions that form the foundation of our societies? Can public sector institutions as pillars of society leverage the potential of data through elaborate knowledge infrastructures, while preserving and strengthening the public order? What role can the business sector play to support social cohesion?



The symposium answered these and similar questions. The gist of the day was captured well in the keynote from Caroline Davey and Andrew Wootton (Design Against Crime Centre, University of Salford, [Cutting Crime Impact Research Project](#)) who have pioneered a human-centred design approach to crime and security research over the past 20 years. Their approach enables the use of data that meets the needs of police, policymakers and citizens. Research on Predictive Policing highlights that frontline officers do not always use these systems or question its viability. Davey and Wootton called for a better understanding on the needs of users of technology in the design of new digital approaches.



[Click here to watch the keynote by Davey and Wootton](#)

Using data to predict unsocial behaviour and crime: myth or reality?

Another session hosted various academics, a police and civil society organisations to interrogate the use of data for policing and crime prevention. Big Data, algorithms, biometric data and autonomous systems are increasingly used to analyse, understand and predict social behaviour. The Netherlands is among those European countries which are particularly active in the development and deployment of autonomous systems in the public sector. While the use of these technologies promises unique insights and an opportunity to manage processes more efficiently, there are concerns about discrimination, transparency, legitimacy, accountability and the limitation of individual and collective autonomy.

The session delved into legitimate expectations when using data-driven technologies, and explored venues towards best practices, legal compliance and the establishment of sound ethical practices. Rosamunde van Brakel (VUB, LSTS Research Group), Lotte Houwing (Bits of Freedom), Catherine Jasserand (KU Leuven), Maximilian Querbach (Police North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany), Sander van der Waal (Waag) provided their perspectives, with moderation by Oskar Gstrein (Campus Fryslân). The panellists were unanimous in their conclusion that predicting unsocial behaviour with data remains a myth, at least for now.



[Watch the session](#)



International perspectives on Covid-19 monitoring

Anis Fuad (Center for Digital Society, Gadjah Mada University) and Sophie Kwasny (Council of Europe) explored the use of data to track and monitor the spread of Covid-19 through apps in Indonesia and Europe. While the spread of Covid-19 is not the first global pandemic, the measures put into place to track, control and mitigate it have played out in novel ways. Developments in big data and artificial intelligence have accelerated the development of technological tools with different aims: Informing and guiding citizens, facilitating medical consultations and follow-ups, controlling public gathering, monitoring physical distancing and tracking contact chains of infected individuals to name a few. The use of location and personal data on a large scale raises questions concerning data protection, privacy and informational self-determination.

This session explored the types of tools used by cities, regions and countries in response to the pandemic. The risks of misuse of such tools and possible mitigation measures were discussed. Angela Daly (Strathclyde Centre for Internet Law & Policy), Andrej Zwitter (Dean of Faculty Campus Fryslân) completed the views from Indonesia and Europe with a critical interrogation of using apps to monitor a pandemic.



[Watch the session](#)

Tackling online incited disturbances

Various of our local and Dutch partners explored the growing issue of online instigation of local disturbances, such as the riots in various Dutch cities against Covid-measures in February of this year. Municipalities, mayors and police are increasingly having to deal with online public disorder. Current events show that the organising ability of citizens leading to public disturbances has taken off. Online calls for riots, illegal parties and demonstrations are becoming more frequent. Other online phenomena can also cause disturbances, with new phenomena such as 'the Blue Whale Challenge'.

Research in this field deals with monitoring and enforcement possibilities of municipalities and police, but also shows that online monitoring and enforcement are digital tightrope acts within, among others, the current privacy legislation and in relation to freedom of expression. Lynn van Meijgaard (NHSV), Arnout de Vries (TNO), Saskia Westers (NHL Stenden), Heinrich Winter (RUG) explored this topic in this session under moderation of Willem Bantema (NHL Stenden).



[Watch the session](#)



Future research venues

Other sessions explored [the impact of a cyber crisis](#), Europol's fight against cybercrime and [the role of difficult to reach groups and communities](#) when working with data. Common themes in all these sessions were the need for interdisciplinary approaches and collaborations. The digitalisation and datafication of our societies continues in rapid pace and the social sciences and humanities are an integral part of understanding the problems, as well in the design of solutions with data. Furthermore, studying the mobilisation of data also teaches us that simply because we can use data does not always mean we should. Working with Big Data, AI and related developments requires careful consideration of the social, ethical and legal implications as well as a thorough review of its effectiveness. Covid-19 tracking apps and Predictive Policing, for instance, teach us that the efficacy of these tools remains rather weak and hard to measure.

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