



Principles & Leadership in Business

'MORE THAN THE SUM OF OUR CELLS' ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

Data dictates nearly every aspect of our lives, and the ethical issues and opportunities around the collection, curation and management of data are a reoccurring topic of discussion with many guests on The New P&L - Principles & Leadership in Business podcast series.

In May 2020, The New P&L hosted an exclusive virtual roundtable discussion – sponsored by UK-based ethical data champions, My Life Digital and titled 'More than the Sum of our Cells'. We bought together some great minds from the tech industry to discuss how we can ensure that as the source point for the collection of all this data - we as individuals and consumers - do not simply become the sum of our data points in a world run by algorithms, as well as what can or should tech companies, regulators and individuals do to protect privacy and ensure the 'human' is not lost in the 'drive for data'. This discussion paper outlines some of the key discussion points from the roundtable.

More than the Sum of our Cells

It's difficult — probably impossible — to live our lives without sharing our personal data. As a result, governments, corporations large and small, and even small businesses hold a mountain of information about us. The statistics are mind-boggling: according to one estimate, 1.7MB of data is created every second for every person on earth. A more colourful statistic comes from the World Economic Forum: at the beginning of 2020 the number of bytes in the digital universe was 40 times the number of stars in the observable universe.

This data can be mined for good or bad outcomes. For good, think the track-and-trace apps that hold one of the keys to beating Covid-19. For bad, think the Cambridge Analytica/Facebook scandal of 2018. So how can we — governments, businesses and individuals — prevent abuse of our data and encourage ethical data collection and management?

Under the banner "More than the Sum of our Cells", this was the issue tackled by the seven executives, experts and thought leaders around a virtual round table hosted recently by The New P&L. The subject has been thrown into sharp relief against a complicated backdrop of recent events — the Covid-19 pandemic, widespread loss of trust in established institutions, "fake news", alleged outside interference in the democratic process, and consumers' growing concerns about the security of the data they share. All of which fed into an illuminating debate about what constitutes an ethical data philosophy.

Person data and positive outcomes

For J Cromack, chief innovation officer of data privacy consultancy MyLife Digital, the goal is to reach a situation that "enables the positive outcomes that sharing personal data makes possible while protecting us against from the 'bad actors' looking to use data against us."

The current pandemic has highlighted the former, he believes, and considers our willingness to share data in the current pandemic — who we are, where we are, who we meet, and so on — as a starting template for an ethical infrastructure. "It comes down to understanding why it's important for me to share my data — what the objective is, how my data will be used, and how long for. Establishing a limitation of purpose, in other words."

While acknowledging that privacy activists see a downside in universal, pandemic-inspired data sharing, Christopher Kenna, founder and CEO of cultural marketing agency Brand Advance, believes

the need to save lives should trump such concerns. He not only questions whether we are being asked for more data than, say, we share with dating apps, but also sees the information gathered having positive impacts post-pandemic. “Those stats quoted at the government’s daily coronavirus briefings — about where we go, how we travel, etc — can be used for good. For example, we’ve never before had data that helps keep a park open.”

Nevertheless, Nisrine Nehme from e-discovery platform Relativity added the proviso that, extraordinary as things are at present, some form of normality will return. “When it does, we should be aware of, and alert to, the temptation for governments to leave extraordinary measures in place after the original crisis has passed. The question to be asked is, ‘How do we live after the pandemic?’”

Ethics “are in the eye of the beholder”

At a time of crisis, consenting to share our data for the greater good may be a no-brainer. Look beyond the pandemic, however, and the data management picture is murkier, and shows both the need for an ethical dimension and the challenges to be overcome to put one in place.

US-based venture capitalist Philippe Bouissou brought 25 years’ experience of Silicon Valley to the table, along with a belief that “data ethics are in the eye of the beholder.” He summarised the Silicon Valley data environment as the “Wild West” and the community’s attitude to data privacy as “I’m going to do X and if there’s a problem I’ll sort it when I have to.” The absence of any federal regulation has been mitigated by companies that trade with the European Union having to adhere to the latter’s GDPR framework, but over all Bouissou “can’t see an ethical approach to data management coming from management or investors. Regulation has to come first.”

There was a broad consensus that honesty and transparency are key components of ethical data handling. A major concern for Andrew Laxton, CEO of brand positioning and engagement agency Mixology, is the erosion of consumer trust across all sectors — even the Royal Family. “It seems there’s no one to aspire to. Voters are expected to make smart, informed decisions based on party manifestos built on untruths and lies. Sadly, dishonesty has become the new norm. It’s critical for businesses to press the reset button and start telling a new story, one based on

honesty. It won’t be easy, but coming clean on data — how you elicit, manage and share it — is a start.”

A reset is difficult but not impossible, was the message from Roshni Patel, formerly of Accenture and with wide experience in applying digital technology in the financial sector. She recalled the 2008 financial crisis, when “customers hated banks.” The field was open for more nimble fintech newcomers to show the way forward, she said, and as a result “banks understand their role better and focus on honesty and responsibility. Instead of just thinking up new products to push on customers, they’re thinking about how they can help them in their daily lives. Banks are built on data, so how it’s managed is really important.”

Charlie Stockford has built a business — SustainIt — specialising in helping companies manage and report financial data as part of their sustainability and corporate social responsibility policies. She too offered encouragement, citing examples of competing companies in a range of sectors coming together to establish initiatives designed to demonstrate ethical conduct to consumers. The Better Cotton Initiative in the fashion industry is one such example, she said. “Transparency — a willingness to show, tell and share — is key.”

“On every level, at every moment”

Willingly handing over personal data is so much a part of consumers’ daily lives — “We’re being collected on every level, in every moment,” said Nisrine Nehme — that they have ceased to question both the volume of information they share and how it’s used. The implementation of the GDPR in 2018 raised awareness of just how widely our data is scattered, but Philippe Bouissou still pronounced himself “stunned by how little people know about what they give and what happens to it.”

As a strong advocate of contextual marketing as opposed to cookie-driven behavioural targeting, Christopher Kenna has watched closely as brands and consumers push back against what they increasingly regard as intrusive advertising triggered by granular data mined from the deepest seams. “Contextual relevance — placing messages where they are likely to appeal to the widest audience — seems to have been forgotten. Marketers have got bogged down, only interested in how many layers of data they can stick onto a campaign.

“Data is good if it helps you reach the maximum number of people, but too often it narrows the appeal. But the good news is, the industry is moving back to the contextual approach, stripping away data, telling a good story above all, and placing it where it will resonate with people.”

Regulation “a good thing”

The question of whether regulation stifles innovation is often asked, but the panel unanimously rejected the idea. For Philippe Bouissou, regulation “defines the limits of the sandbox. Inside it, you can do what you like”, while Roshni Patel sees regulatory bodies providing a valuable sounding-board for innovators. “They can talk to the regulators and form coordinated leadership around a topic. Governments can’t do this, because there are just too many viewpoints to take into account.”

J Cromack described two recipes for ethical self-regulation of innovation. The first involved putting yourself in the place of the intended user; the second applied the “granny principle”: “If, when you explain it to your granny, it sounds creepy, you probably shouldn’t be doing it.”

Andrew Laxton and Christopher Kenna homed in on the question of who does the regulating, and how the regulators are themselves regulated. “Putting regulation in place entails a huge consultative process,” said Laxton. “It involves government, business and the public. Regulation should be the job of government. We shouldn’t let ‘Big Tech’ set the tone — involve them, of course, but make them accountable.” For Kenna, exactly who does the enforcing is important: “We can’t have six men making decisions about gender stereotyping, for example.”

Ethical is personal

One message came out loud and clear from the discussions: establishing an ethical framework for data management begins and ends with the us, the data providers. As Charlie Stockford said, “As consumers, we must ask questions about our data — put hard questions to business, about where it’s going, who’s using it. Really push them.”

Philippe Bouissou identified three components that can empower the individual. “The first is knowledge — who is collecting the data, what they’re collecting, what it’s for, and how is it protected. Second is consent

— once I have the knowledge, what do I agree to allow. Third is control — how can I see, change or delete my personal data. Until we can resolve these three, I think privacy and data collection will be one of the most vexing and critical challenges in the next few decades — as big as sustainability, inequality and healthcare.”

J Cromack agreed that empowering individuals in relation to the collection and use of data is a massive ask. “It involves interoperability, standards we can all work with. But it’s essential we build the infrastructure for human-centric personal data management and governance. There are so many positive outcomes from enabling data to flow between individuals and organisations, but the individual must always know where his or her data has gone, what it’s being used for, and be able to amend it. In the next decade we should arrive at a situation where the individual is the data controller and other parties the processors, and they can only use it for the purpose it was shared for, and within a time limit.”

For Roshni Patel, such a situation is “especially important in a world where digital businesses are built on interconnecting platforms. Data is constantly being passed between different entities. Take open banking as an example: the individual sets in motion a process to achieve a desired outcome, but they don’t know what data exchanges happen in the process, and they may not have given permission for it to happen. “Privacy and security also plays into questions of monopolies, which is why the EU competition commissioner is investigating whether Big Tech data holders are driving anti-competition. For example, Facebook owns WhatsApp but what data is being exploited from WhatsApp users?”

The last word should go to Philippe Bouissou, who contrasted how we see and understand ourselves — and are seen and understood — in our digital world today with how it was in a pre-digital age. “For good or bad, we are transitioning from atoms to bits. Centuries ago my sense of who I am was created by physical interactions with people — my family, the market where I shopped. Now that part is much smaller compared to the data signature and the data elements people have on me. However, these don’t truly reveal who I am as a human being. Once people become more aware of data issues — and Covid-19 has helped this — then solutions will be found.”



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