

Are Data Ethics More or Less Important During a Public Health Emergency?



Essay Assessment

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Introduction

Covid-19 has been a global pandemic recently and caused a public health emergency which has influenced the government, health sectors, and researchers worldwide to gather as much data as possible to understand the extent of this pandemic (Lin & Hou, 2020; Zhu et al., 2020). However, it is argued by Floridi & Taddeo (2016) that the widespread use of data by organisations, researchers and governments has caused ethical challenges. Therefore, to overcome these data ethic issues, Cheng (2019) stated it can be tackled by using the principal of information governance, which will allow the data to be secured and managed confidentially by both organisations and people in order to give the best health service. However, it is argued by the Health and Care Professional Council (HCPC) (2021) that sometimes it is necessary to deviate from established procedures during a public health emergency like Covid-19. Moreover, data protection must not be a barrier to essential work and communication with the public and colleagues during public health emergencies (HCPC, 2021). Consequently, whether ethical data is more critical during a pandemic is still being debated; however, it can be assessed by comparing the pros and cons of the information governance reduction during Covid-19.

Benefits of Relaxed Data Ethics

Some studies done by Lv et al. (2021), Horizon (n.d.) and Lee (2020) stated that using personal information such as age, date of birth, location, citizenship and travel history through advanced technology can help speed up the Covid-19 data analysis which will subsequently impact the government's decision-making. Horizon (n.d.) implied that lowering information governance has had a massive impact through the research project called NextStrain to produce the Covid-19 weekly analysis trend, in which the data will be used globally. It is also supported by Lee (2020) that by lowering the information governance during Covid-19, the government in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea have been able to track and enforce quarantine to whom need to be quarantined and will be fined for non-compliance. The UK government also using this location tracking method to figure out the social-distancing effectiveness (Herbert Smith Freehills, 2020). Surprisingly, The Straits Times (2020), a Singapore newspaper, found that the location tracking policy is supported by 80.2 % of people for tracking people who are supposed to be self-quarantined. Through Herbert Smith Freehills (2020); Horizon (n.d.) and Lee's (2020) arguments it has shown some right reasons why lowering information governance requirements during the pandemic positively impacts the Covid-19 handling.

Drawbacks of Relaxed Data Ethics

There is an inconsistency with Lee's (2020) study states that lowering information governance will help the government to make a decision regarding Covid-19. However, it is also confirmed that there is a concern for the misused of data for external purposes, which will lead to a new norm and is suggested that each epidemiological crisis stage should have better governance and policies once public health emergency returns to normal (Lee, 2020). This concern is also raised by Ferretti & Vayena (2022), who point out that public health emergencies are used as an excuse to justify disruptive interventions at the expense of public safety. Both Ferretti & Vayena (2022) and Lee's (2020) cases have shown a risk of lowering information governance; moreover, Gasser et al. (2020) added that lowering information governance has caused discrimination by third parties and hinders people's fundamental freedom due to being watched all the time by the authorities.

Furthermore, although The Straits Times (2020) uses the statistical number to support their argument about how many people support the government's policy– location tracking, Levine (2021) argues that people have had trust issues with government, corporates and health research due to data exploitation and irresponsibility of data management. For instance, 18,105 Covid-19 personal data such as initials, date of birth, geographic area, and gender were

mistakenly uploaded to the public server in Wales which raised concern and anxiety for Welsh residents; surprisingly, the related authorities underestimate the leakage of information by saying that the data was not misused and the risk of data misuse is shallow (Shirbon, 2020). Another example of the authorities' irresponsibility in lowering information governance is mentioned in American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) newspaper (2021). ALEC (2021) reported that more than 70,000 Pennsylvanians' private information, such as names, telephone numbers, emails, and their diagnosis or exposure to Covid-19, have been leaked and can be accessed on the internet, which was handled late by the Department of Health after the government denied this incident in the first place.

Whilst some of the authorities, like the Welsh and Pennsylvania, do not report the negative effect of data leakage and not taking it seriously, both Nabe (n.d.) from Deloitte and Cheng (2019) reported several disadvantages arising from leaks of private information during Covid-19 such as increased numbers of cyber-attacks, online scams and material loss. Therefore, Cheng (2019) goes against the HCPC and instead accentuates information governance as it is respectful, beneficial, fair, and transparent.

Conclusion

In conclusion, several reports above say that lowering information governance will be beneficial to speed up Covid-19 management, and the data protection policy should not hinder the pivotal work of Covid-19 handling. However, the desire to contribute during Covid-19 and to speed up the Covid-19 research as well as Covid-19 management should not be used as an excuse to ignore data privacy then because it raises people's trust issues with the authorities and gives several adverse effects such as the rise of cyber-attacks and online scams as well as financial loss. Information governance is paramount as its principle will not cause trust issues between people and the authorities. Therefore, by outweighing the benefits and drawbacks of lowering information governance, it is best to respect data privacy, and it proves that data ethics is more important during public health emergencies like Covid-19.

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