

Understanding and Improving Human Data Relations

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Contents

Abstract	1
Dedication	2
Acknowledgements	2
Lists of Tables and Figures	4
Tables in Chapter 3	4
Tables in Chapter 4	4
Tables in Chapter 5	5
Tables in ‘Additional Reference Information’	5
Figures in Chapter 1	5
Figures in Chapter 2	5
Figures in Chapter 3	5
Figures in Chapter 5	6
Figures in Chapter 7	6
Figures in ‘Additional Reference Information’	7
Bibliography	7

Abstract

Technologies including PCs, smartphones, and cloud computing have transformed the world: In our daily lives we interact with many businesses and public services who (to reduce costs) increasingly seek to rely on data collection and processing rather than face-to-face user interactions to inform their decisions. This creates an *imbalance of power* between those who hold data and the individuals about whom data is stored, who cannot easily see their personal data or how it is used. This *Digital Civics* PhD research explores, from a pragmatic, individualist, constructivist perspective, the topic of ***Human Data Relations***. Through two qualitative case studies across public and private

sectors, it answers the question, ‘*What relationship do people need with their personal data?*’. Case Study One focuses on *Early Help* social care: Through four workshops with supported families, social workers and staff, a deep understanding of the individual perspective on civic personal data use is established. *Shared data interaction* is explored as a means to shift the balance of power towards the individual while maintaining an effective care relationship. Case Study Two is a three-month study exploring 10 participants’ experience of using *GDPR data access rights* to view their own data, resulting in insights into individual needs and the challenges of data-centric service relationships, and recommendations for improvement of policies and practices. With reference to literature from the fields of *Personal Information Management*, *Human Data Interaction* and *MyData* personal data ecosystems, these case studies contribute to a unified understanding of *six core needs* that people have in Human Data Relations. In the final chapter, the thesis discusses the *practical pursuit* of these goals, drawing on first-hand knowledge acquired from expert participation in industrial research projects at BBC R&D and Hestia.ai/SITRA, *mapping out the landscape for future research and innovation*.

Dedication

For my children Rosie, Joey, and Zach; my nephew Elliott; and my nieces Amy and Lyla. My wish is that that you and your generation might soon experience a future where technology can truly help people and empower them to thrive, and where personal data drives human flourishing more than corporate profit. I hope that this research can in some small way contribute to a better future for you all.

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No-one really knows how hard a PhD is until they are already well beyond the point of no return. It is demanding, challenging and often thankless and lonely work. You spend countless hours striving to find meaning among masses of data or iterating endlessly to concisely express complex, nebulous and elusive ideas. This endeavour is made even harder when you are a mature student with financial and parental responsibilities. At times, especially during the final unfunded writing-up period, the impacts upon my life and those around me have been huge and unreasonable. For this reason, the greatest thanks of all go to my wife Joni Bowyer, who has stood by me throughout, picking up the slack again and again where I could not. She has endured the impacts of money, time, uncertainty and divided attention that this unforgiving work has thrust upon our family. She has also provided practical help on countless occasions with everything from poster layout to time management to grammatical advice. I love you forever, Joni. Thank you.

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Lists of Tables and Figures

Lists of Tables by Chapter

Tables in Chapter 3

3.1 - Context One (Civic Data & Early Help): Participants involved in Research Activities leading into Case Study One. 3.2 - Context Two (Digital Life): Participants Involved in Digital Life Research Activities Leading into Case Study Two.

Tables in Chapter 4

4.1 - Case Study One Group Design Workshops 4.2 - Theme 1 - Meaningful Data Interaction for Families: Subthemes & Participant Quotes 4.3 - Theme 2 - Giving a Voice to the Family: Subthemes & Participant Quotes 4.4 - Theme 3 - Earning Families' Trust Through Transparency: Subthemes & Participant Quotes

Tables in Chapter 5

5.1 - Types of Data Holding Organisation Targeted for GDPR Requests by Study Participants 5.2 - Types of Personal Data Potentially Accessible from Data Holders via GDPR Rights 5.3 - Presence and Quality Assessments of GDPR Responses by Data Type (as Percentages) 5.4 - Participants' Hopes, Imagined Data Uses and Goals for GDPR, as well as Resultant Outcomes 5.5 - Theme 1 - Insufficient Transparency: Subthemes & Participant Quotes 5.6 - Theme 2 - Confusing & Unuseable Data: Subthemes & Participant Quotes 5.7 - Theme 3 - Fragile Relationships: Subthemes & Participant Quotes

Tables in 'Additional Reference Information'

ARI4.1 - Example Categories of Family Civic Data ARI5.1 - Best and Worst Data Holders for GDPR, according to Participants' Judgements ARI7.1 - Eight Lenses on Personal Data

Lists of Figures by Chapter

Figures in Chapter 1

1.1 - Poster Presentation of Case Study One 1.2 - The Structure of This Thesis

Figures in Chapter 2

2.1 - The Wisdom Curve: Making Data into Meaningful Information 2.2 - Li *et al.*'s Stage-based Model of Personal Informatics Systems

Figures in Chapter 3

3.1 - My Action Research Approach 3.2 - Family Facts — What is Data? 3.3 - Walls of Data — Sensitising Participants to the World of Commercially-held Data and GDPR 3.4 - Sentence Ranking — Bringing Support Workers and Families to a Shared Problem Space 3.5 - Family Civic Data Cards — Things to Think With 3.6 - Personal Data Examples — Making Data Relatable 3.7 - Home Interviewing: Card Sorting with a Family in Their Living Room 3.8 - Ideation Decks — Combining Random Design Ingredients to Generate New Ideas 3.9 - Group Poster Design — A Participant-designed Poster to Advertise Features of Imagined Data Interface Products 3.10 - Storyboarding Cards — A Collaboratively-constructed Narrative Created through Discussion from a Palette of Possible Parent and Staff Actions 3.11 - Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Data using Quirkos for Case Study One 3.12 - Spreadsheet-based Quantitative Analysis of Interview Data for Case Study Two 3.13 - Pilot Study Recruitment Poster 3.14 - How the Case Studies and Peripheral Activities Contribute to This Thesis

Figures in Chapter 4

4.1 - Participants' Shared Values Deduced from Sentence Rankings Data 4.2 - Current Model of Data Interaction, and Proposed Model of Shared Data Interaction

Figures in Chapter 5

5.1 - A Journey Map of Each Participant's Study Progression 5.2 - An Example Life Sketch from Interview 1, with Data Handling Companies in Red, Data Types in Blue, and Feelings in Green 5.3 - Sankey Overview of Participants' GDPR Requests 5.4 - Longitudinal Distribution of Net Changes in Participants' Perceived Power and Trust Scores 5.6 - Participants' Perceived Trust in Provider at Different Stages of the GDPR/Study Process

Figures in Chapter 7

7.1 - The Two Motivations for HDR: Controlling Your Personal Data Ecosystem and Utilising Your Information About Your Life 7.2 - Mapping the Six Wants into Objectives for the HDR Opportunity Landscape 7.3 - Obstacles and Resulting Insights in the HDR Opportunity Landscape 7.4 - Life Concept Modelling 7.5 - Mock-up of a Unified TV Viewing History Interface 7.6 - SubsCrab: An Example Application for Ecosystem Detection and Visualisation 7.7 - Some of the Many Aspects of Metadata that Might Exist About a Datapoint or Dataset 7.8 - The Panopticon Structure of the Illinois State Penitentiary 7.9 - Human Values, as Identified in BBC R&D Research Funded by Nesta 7.10 - A Contact-and-Calendar-centric PDS Approach 7.11 - The Scattered Data Relating to a Vacation 7.12 - Mock-up of a Unified Interface for a Vacation 7.13 - Annotating Data with Semantic Context 7.14 - Theory of Change [ToC]: The Four Dimensions of Change 7.15 - HDR Approach 1: Discovery-Driven Activism 7.16 - HDR Approach 2: Building the Human-centric Future 7.17 - Conceptual Model for a Personal Data Store System 7.18 - High Level Data Types 7.19 - Life Information Modelled as Happenings 7.20 - A Simple PDS Life Information Presentation Model 7.21 - Mock-up of Life Information Presented in a PDS Interface 7.22 - Life Partitioning Analogy using a Cluedo™ board 7.23 - Mock-up: Browsing by Areas of Life 7.24 - Identifying Entity Associations in Data 7.25 - Facebook's World2vec Model, Semantically Modelling Human Information from Social Media Posts on Facebook 7.26 - Identifying the Attributes of Data 7.27 - Determining the Nature of a Piece of Data 7.28 - Attributes of Data 7.29 - Actions One Might Perform on Life Information 7.30 - Questions One Might Ask of Life Information 7.31 - Example Taxonomies for Life Information Navigation 7.32 - HDR Approach 3: Defending User Autonomy and Hacking the Information Landscape 7.33 - The Modern 'Black Box' View of Technology 7.34 - HDR Approach 4: Winning Hearts and Minds: Teaching, Championing and Selling the Vision 7.35 - SILVER Health Data Viewing Interface 7.36 - Summary of Generalised Change Strategies for Pursuing Better HDR, Using the ToC Model

Figures in ‘Additional Reference Information’

ARI3.1 - Private Data Viewing Monitor with Viewing Glasses
ARI4.1 - Extract of Sample Scenario Storyboarding Exercise walkthrough
ARI4.2 - Example Backing Mat for Storyboard Decks
ARI5.1 - Screenshot from Quirkos During Coding Process
ARI5.2 - Screenshot from Quirkos at End of Coding Process
ARI5.3 - Screenshot from Workflowy During Theme Construction

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