

2020 IASSIST US Regional Secretary Report

Awards for members and affiliated organizations

Jeremy Darrington – Marta Lange/Sage CQ Press Award recipient from ACRL

Ron Nakao - William H. Flanigan Award recipient from ICPSR

Zachary Painter – George Mandel Memorial Award recipient from SLA

Issues of interest for US membership

COVID-19

The global pandemic caused by COVID-19 has impacted US members in a myriad of ways, many of which may not be well understood currently. Academic institutions and businesses have closed their physical locations to all but essential staff, meaning many members are now working from home full-time. Data are increasingly in-demand from researchers, policy makers, journalists, and the public, along with the techniques, tools, and know-how to turn it into useful information.

The demand for real-time data to understand the spread and impacts of the pandemic on the United States has risen, as many traditional health and economic measures are lagging. Some notable mentions:

- Established providers of real-time data that are typically tied to physical locations (e.g. Bloomberg, Refinitiv Eikon) have worked with institutions to provide remote access to users
- Academic institutions have opened access to new, novel sources of data, including:
 - o Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/>
 - o University of Washington <https://hgis.uw.edu/virus/>
- Government agencies are collecting new data and releasing publicly and through FOIA requests (e.g. US Census Household and Business pulse surveys)
- Businesses like Safegraph and Homebase are opening access to data for researchers to use during the pandemic

2020 Decennial Census collection

The once-a-decade, constitutionally mandated count of every person living in the country is underway in the United States. These data are used to redraw voting districts, guide the geographic distribution of federal funds to states, counties, cities, and households, and serve as a valuable source of information for secondary research. Field operations were halted in March amid the coronavirus pandemic, but phased restarts resumed in May.

The 2020 Census does not include a citizenship question, an issue that made its way to the Supreme Court in 2019 and put the accuracy and completeness of the official count into question.

The Census is moving forward with their plan to apply Differential Privacy (DP) methods to “inject noise” into data at smaller geographic units to reduce the disclosure risk. These methods increase confidentiality, but by design also result in loss of statistical accuracy of the smaller geographic units. So there is a tension between confidentiality and privacy of respondents and the aim to provide quality

statistical data to stakeholders. The exact DP methods that the Census will adopt are still being discussed internally and with external stakeholders.

American Economic Association Data and Code Availability Policy

The American Economic Association released its Data and Code Availability Policy on July 10, 2019, which significantly raised the documentation and data sharing requirements for publishing in an AEA journal. This policy is largely due to the efforts of Lars Vilhuber, AEA's new Data Editor. Economists are required to deposit data and materials with community-recognized or general repositories, and AEA has worked with ICPSR to establish a repository in OpenICPSR for this purpose <https://www.openicpsr.org/openicpsr/aea>

Proliferation of new anonymized data sources

Novel sources of data on consumer behavior are highly valued by researchers and companies, but the legality, ethics and reputational risks of using these sources is up for debate.

Companies collecting mobile phone locations have been criticized over privacy concerns, though several have provided their data to researchers and government agencies during the coronavirus crisis.

Mentioned above, SafeGraph provides foot traffic data collected through cell phones. The data are anonymized, meaning the locations of exact devices were hidden, with only general trends shown. SafeGraph says it tracks only users who have "opted in" via mobile apps, and was cited by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in an April report on COVID-19 and are used by NPR.

An Avast antivirus subsidiary called Jumpshot was highlighted in a Vice report¹ due to their selling of highly sensitive web browsing data to major corporations including Home Depot, Google, and Pepsi, among many others.

The ethical considerations for using these data are not one-size fits all, and are linked directly to the nature, source, and methodologies of the resources themselves, but as both supply and demand for these data grow, the role of IASSIST members in helping researchers and institutions both discover them and consider the implications for use will also grow.

Cox, J. (2020, January 27). *Leaked Documents Expose the Secretive Market for Your Web Browsing Data*. Retrieved from Motherboard Tech by Vice: https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/qjdkq7/avast-antivirus-sells-user-browsing-data-investigation