

Communicating Privacy to the Public

CNSTAT Workshop on Approaches to Sharing Blended Data
in a 21st Century Data Infrastructure

May 25, 2023

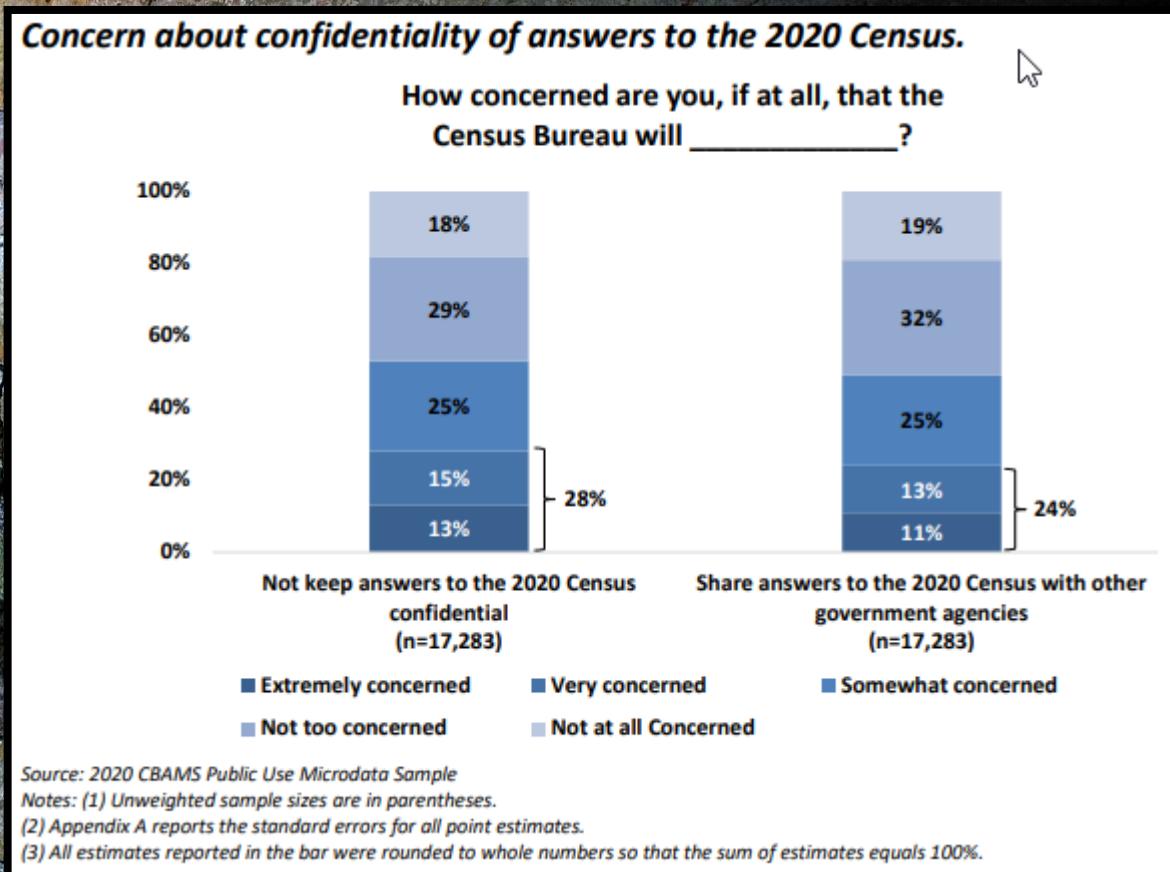
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Privacy attitudes are a barrier to survey participation



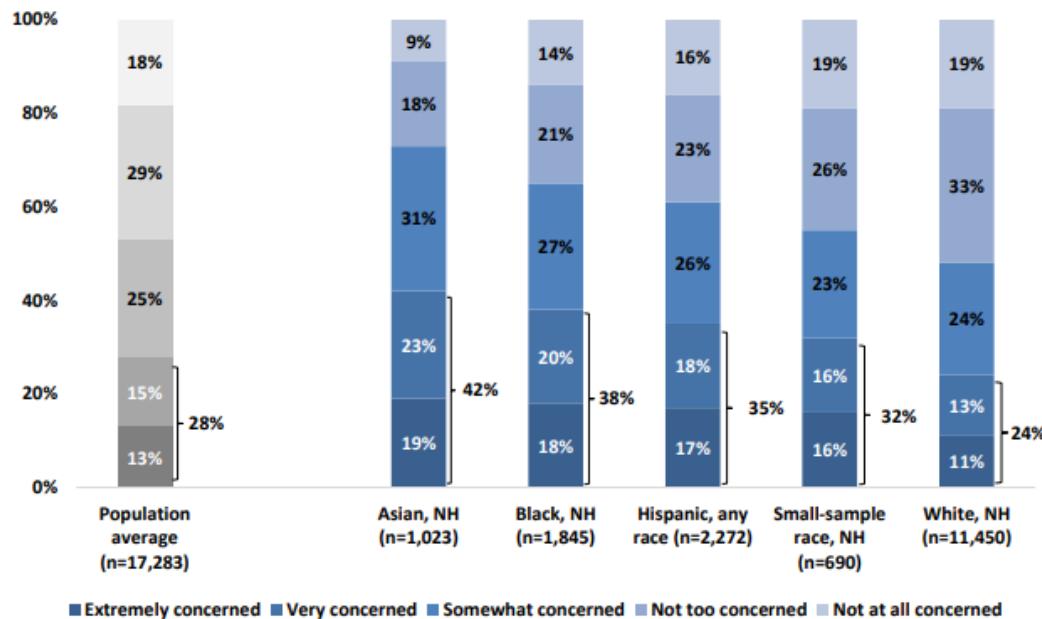
53% of respondents were “somewhat,” “very,” or “extremely” concerned about the Census Bureau’s ability to protect the confidentiality of their data.

49% thought the Census Bureau would share their information with other government agencies.

Privacy attitudes vary by demographic group

All racial and Hispanic-origin groups were more concerned that the Census Bureau would not keep their answers to the census confidential than NH Whites.

How concerned are you, if at all, that the Census Bureau will not keep answers to the 2020 Census confidential?



Source: 2020 CBAMS Public Use Microdata Sample

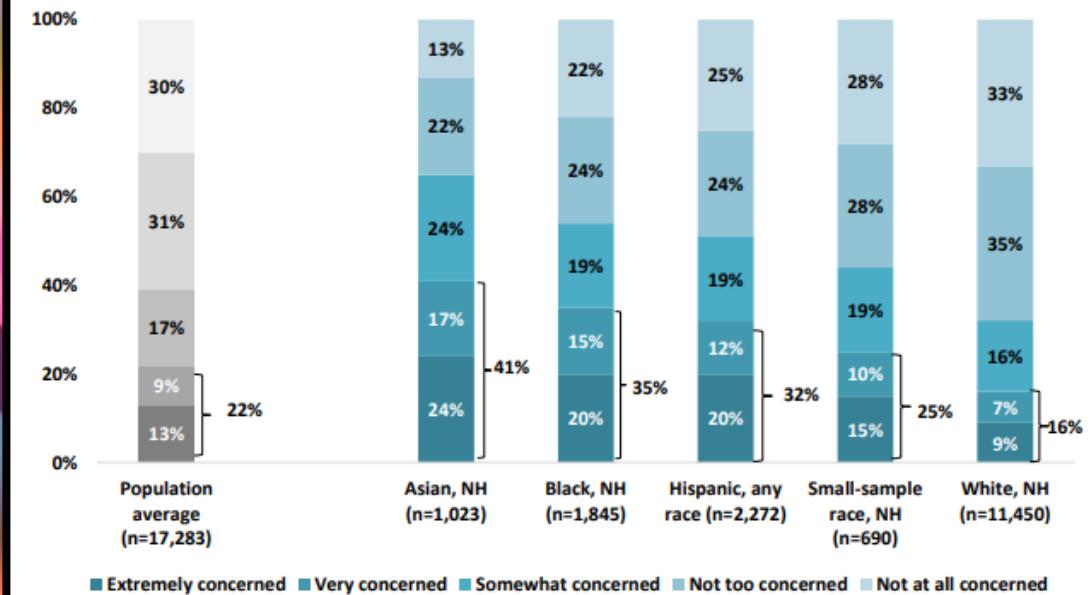
Notes: (1) Unweighted sample sizes are in parentheses

(2) Appendix A reports the standard errors for all point estimates

(3) All estimates reported in the bar were rounded to whole numbers so that the sum of estimates equals 100%

All racial and Hispanic origin groups were more concerned their answers to the 2020 Census would be used against them than NH Whites.

How concerned are you, if at all, that the answers you provide to the 2020 Census will be used against you?



Source: 2020 CBAMS Public Use Microdata Sample

Notes: (1) Unweighted sample sizes are in parentheses.

(2) Appendix A reports the standard errors for all point estimates.

(3) All estimates reported in the bar were rounded to whole numbers so that the sum of estimates equals 100%.

Privacy attitudes are contextual

- Individuals supply data within a particular social, institutional, or administrative context
- Expectations and concerns about privacy will vary widely across contexts (even for the same data element)



Privacy attitudes are transactional

Fears about privacy “*...do not translate into a universal yearning for anonymity. In fact, almost two-thirds of [survey respondents] are comfortable with disclosing information under the terms of the basic Information Age bargain: ‘I give you a piece of information about me in return for something of value from you.’*”

-[Lee Rainie, Pew Internet & American Life Project](#)



Privacy attitudes are difficult to anticipate

“...privacy [is] a ‘landmine issue’ because it is something which may blow up in the faces of people who are not expecting it. They are not aware that it is there as an issue until it blows up.

When we ask people to tell us what issues are important to them spontaneously, they very rarely mention privacy. It is not usually a top-of-the-mind issue. But whenever we ask people about the importance of privacy, they almost invariably tell us that it is important or very important.”

-Humphrey Taylor, The Harris Poll





Privacy attitudes change over time

Take everything I've just said
with a big grain of salt!

*“...public opinion on privacy issues is not stable,
it changes, and will continue to change”*

-Humphrey Taylor, The Harris Poll

Messaging about data protections may hurt rather than help

- "...respondents will extract information about the nature of a survey from the confidentiality assurances given to them. If these assurances are very elaborate, respondents are likely to infer that the survey is sensitive and that they will be asked a number of questions that may be unpleasant, embarrassing, or incriminating." - [Singer, Hippler, and Schwarz \(1992\)](#)

[Landreth, Gerber, and DeMaio \(2008\)](#) also note:

- Messaging about "confidentiality," "statistical purposes," and linkage to administrative records is often misunderstood, or seen as vague or open-ended
- Messaging about legal protections and penalties for unauthorized disclosure was variously interpreted as "legalese," the "fine print," or "over the top"



What does this mean in the context
of blended data?



Privacy risks are greater for blended data

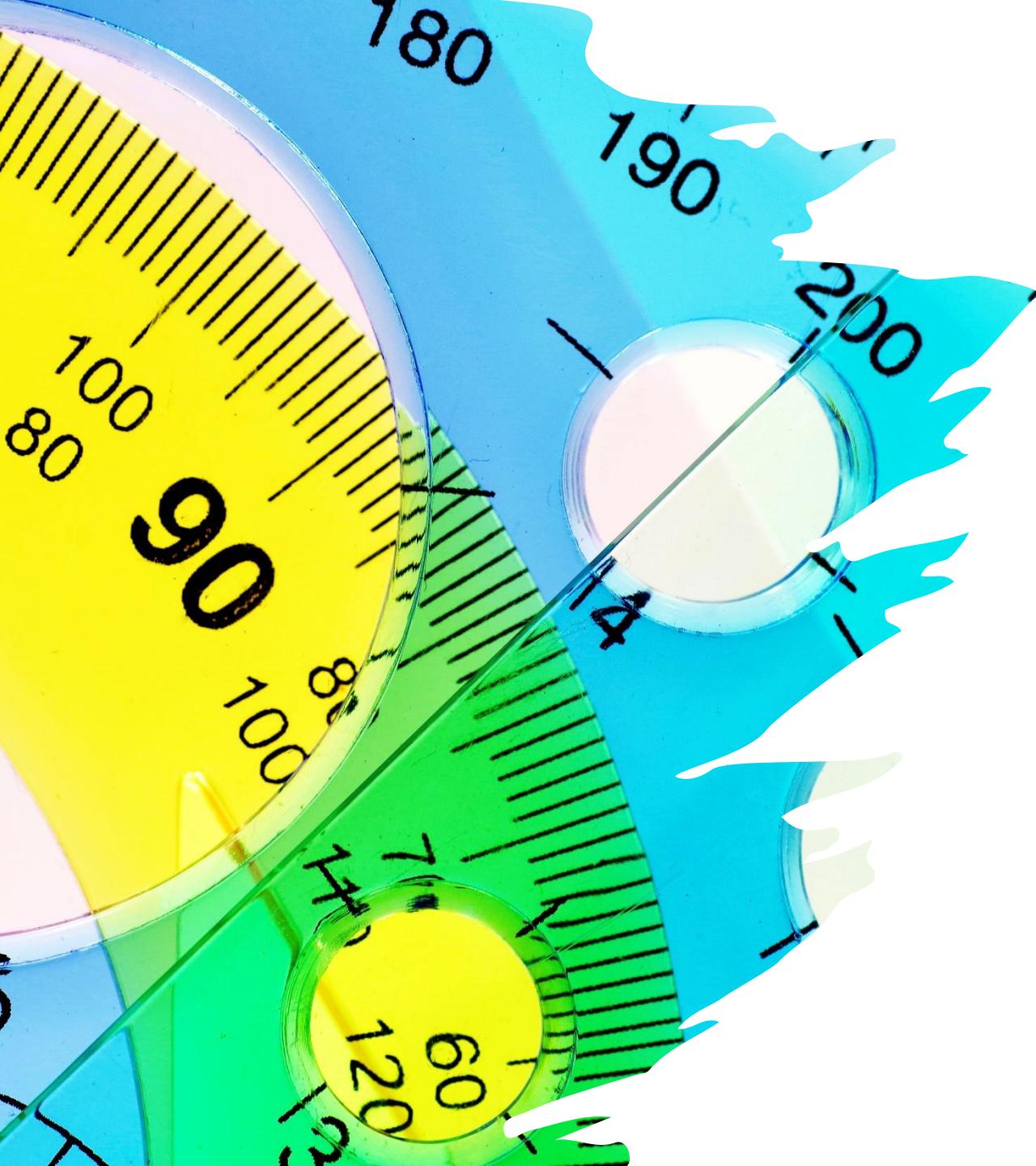
- Blended data are a richer, more complete picture of the data subject than the original source files
- Linkable files “out in the wild” increase re-identification risk

Privacy is contextual, but the context of privacy in re-purposed (blended) data is very different than the context in which the data were originally collected



Informed consent notices or statements may not foresee the types of future uses

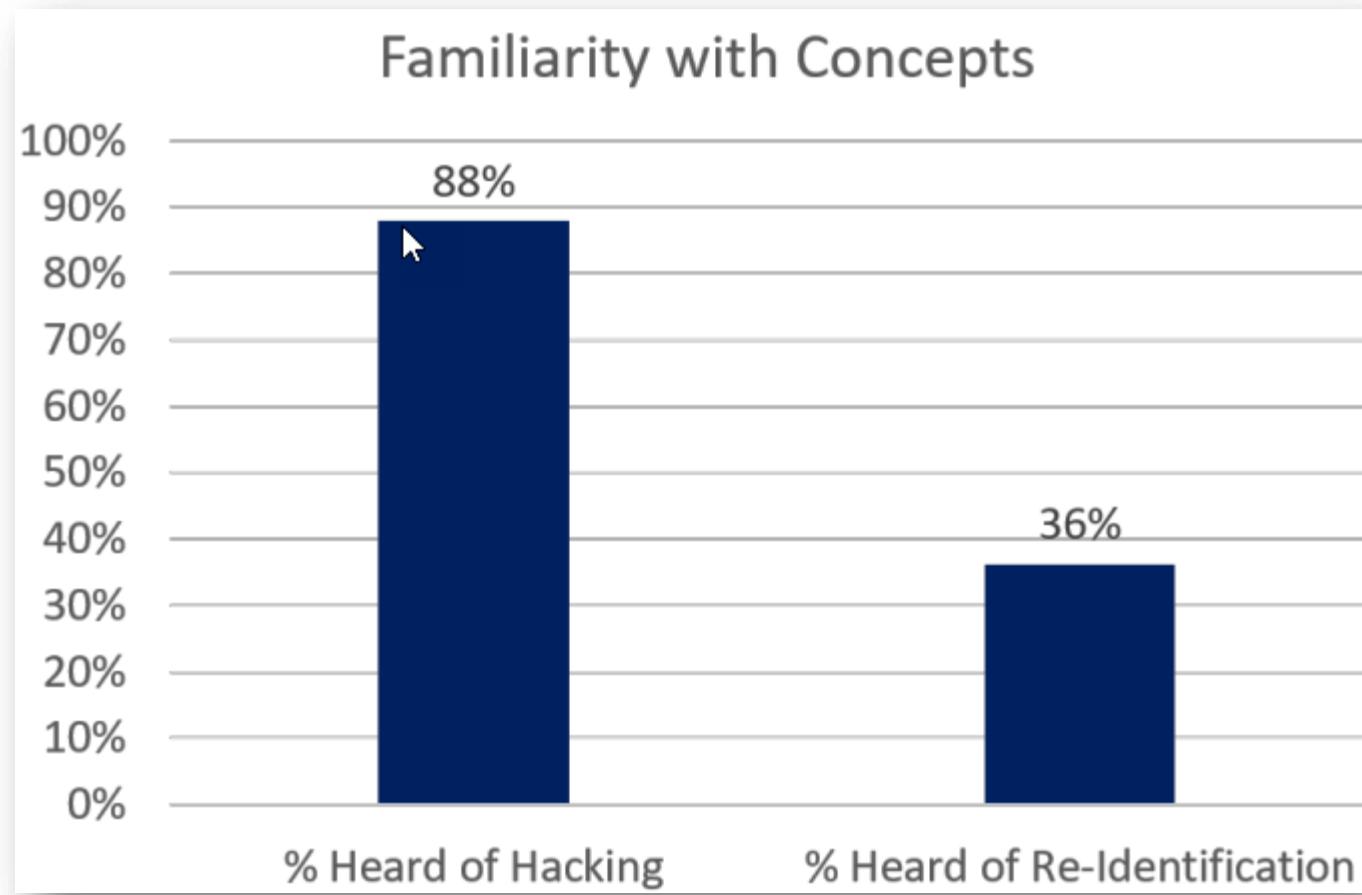




Privacy protections are harder to quantify

- Sequential data releases by each data curator are not (typically) coordinated
- Hence, disclosure controls employed by the data curators may not be composable, undermining efforts to effectively assess and mitigate disclosure risk.

Privacy protections are harder to communicate





What can we do about it?

Don't attempt
to explain
everything to
everyone

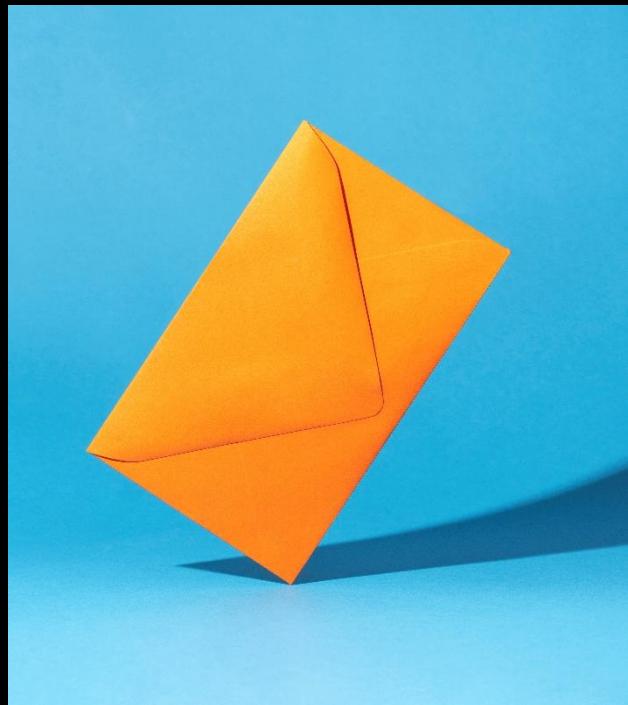




Consider audience-specific messaging when appropriate

Use multi-layered communications strategies

Customize privacy messaging and level of legal/technical detail by communications method and audience



Regularly engage with trusted partners

Invest in educating and engaging with trusted intermediaries and civil society groups

They can also alert you to audience-specific privacy concerns and changes in privacy attitudes over time

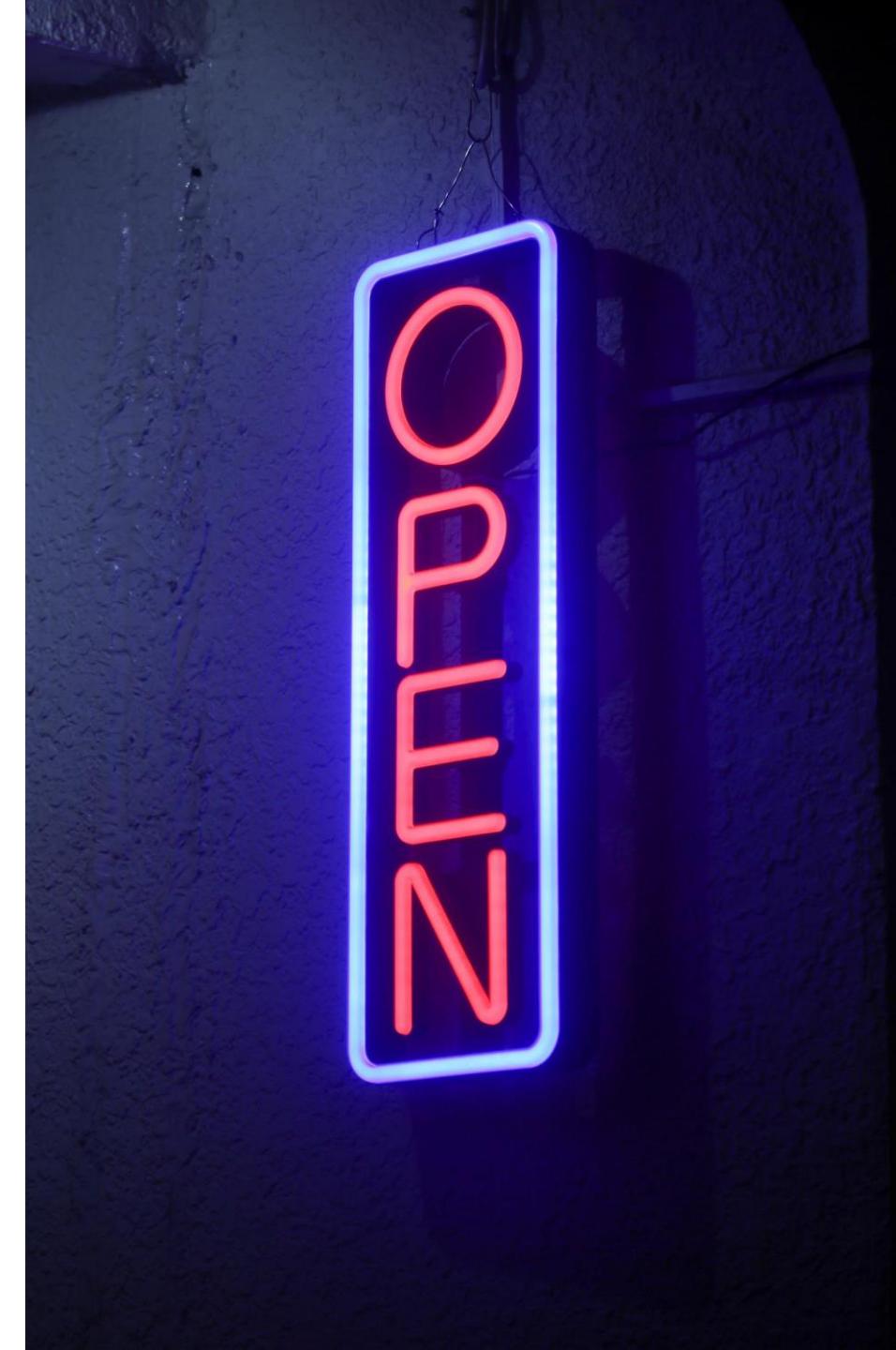


Be transparent

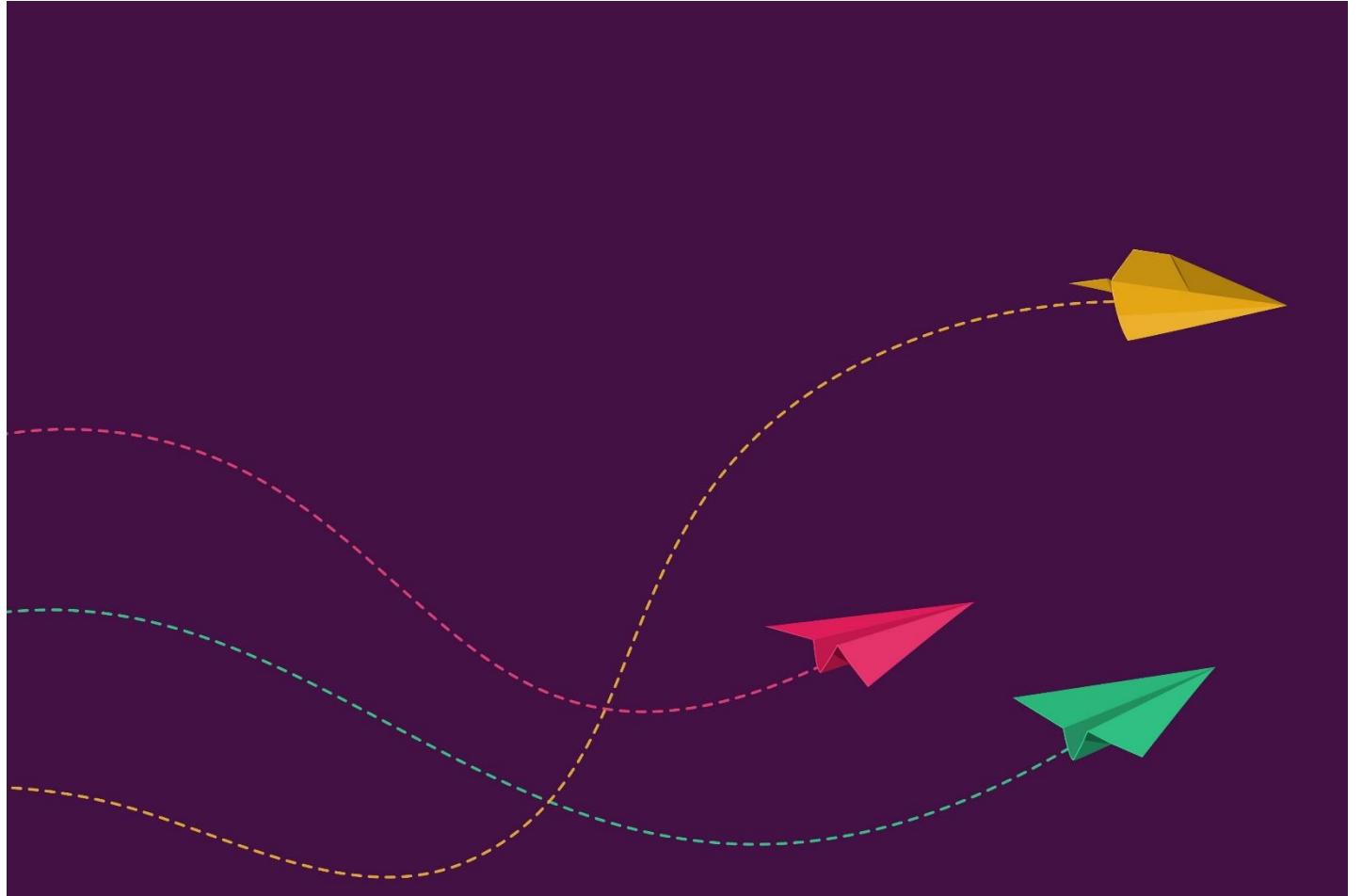
“Increased transparency will enable the public to be informed about how data are being used to improve their government, even as data are being stringently protected.”

“Government also can dramatically improve transparency about its collection and use of data, improving the American public’s ability to hold the government accountable. Adhering to the highest possible standards with respect to privacy and accountability is an important part of earning the public’s trust.”

[-Commission on Evidence-based Policymaking \(2017\)](#)



Continue to
research and
track evolving
public attitudes
about privacy



Questions?



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