

The Big Read **Hedge funds**

Hedge funds see a gold rush in data mining

Investors seek an advantage from tradable intelligence but legality of alternative data is in question

AUGUST 28, 2017 by Lindsay Fortado, Robin Wigglesworth and Kara Scannell

When Under Armour, the sportswear maker brought to prominence in Oliver Stone's American football epic *Any Given Sunday*, reported its latest earnings in early August, it was an unpleasant surprise for many investors.

The company reported a [second straight quarter of losses](#), cut its sales outlook for the rest of the year and announced a large restructuring programme that it warned would halve its operating profits in 2017. The shares tumbled almost 9 per cent on the day and have kept sagging since.

But for some [hedge funds](#) that were sold bespoke data on the company, the dismal results might not have been such a surprise. In recent years there has been a proliferation of new “alternative data vendors” that trawl through vast pools of digital information and [sell it to investment groups](#) desperate for an edge in markets.

These vendors often scoop up the digital “exhaust” that people, companies and countries throw out through the normal course of their business and turn it into valuable intelligence.

For example, hints of [Under Armour's](#) downturn could have been detected in a decline in job listings on its website, the internal rating of its chief executive by employees on Glassdoor, the recruitment site, or a dip in the average price of clothes on its website. But this is just the tip of the alternative data iceberg, and investors are waking up to the fact.

Types of alternative data: 1. Website scraping



Many data vendors scrape public websites for information that might be valuable, ranging from downloads of apps and user reviews to what airlines and hotels are receiving bookings through Expedia and Priceline, for instance. Social media sites can also be scraped for hints on consumer views and trends.

“In order to generate sustained [returns] investors must embrace the task of acquiring, analysing and understanding the ever-growing data universe,” BlackRock said in a recent paper. “Those that fail to do so run the risk of falling behind in a rapidly changing investment landscape.”

Many of our online activities leave a digital fingerprint. Our mobile phones can be tracked, our emails scanned and our online purchases monitored. Companies release vast amounts of data on their websites and even local and national governments are digitising many aspects of their operations.

The vendors scrape this “big data” — for everything from geolocation details to consumer trends and sentiment analysis — and turn it into tradable signals. Investment groups have often looked outside traditional information sources such as economic data releases or earnings reports. Some now think this digital treasure trove can underpin the future of the money management industry.

However, there is disquiet over the unregulated nature of the industry, which Tabb Group estimates will double in size in the next five years to \$400m in annual sales. Some fear information that may appear public may in fact be legally protected, while others worry that hedge funds signing deals for exclusive access to certain valuable data sets will open themselves up to close scrutiny in what is a legally grey area.

2. Credit card tracking



The most valuable seam of data for hedge funds is information that shows directly what consumers are spending money on, and credit card companies are the main gold mine. Although it only offers a partial view of sales trends, combined with other data sets it can offer vital insights.

“It’s a brave new world,” says Jonathan Streeter, a former federal prosecutor who led the insider trading case against [Raj Rajaratnam](#), co-founder of the Galleon Group hedge fund. Mr Streeter is now a partner in New York at Dechert, a law firm with a large hedge fund client base, where he advises on what data sets are legal to purchase and use.

“I don’t know of a case that’s been brought, but everyone anticipates that there will be one soon and [prosecutors] would like to bring one,” Mr Streeter says. “This is a hot topic. I get a lot of calls from clients.”

This year, a senior executive from the family investment office of Steve Cohen, the billionaire whose SAC Capital Advisors hedge fund was shut down by federal authorities in 2013 over insider trading, was praising “big data” as its new edge over the market.

Speaking at a conference on alternative investments at the London School of Economics, Matthew Granade, Point72’s chief market intelligence officer, bragged that they scrutinise 80m credit card transactions every day. Coupled with satellite images that can scan car parks and geolocation data from mobile phones to show how many people are visiting various stores, the investment group can get a real-time idea of how companies are doing, long before their results are released.

One LSE student asked how all this data could help Point72 if everyone had access to the same information. The answer was exclusivity agreements, Mr Granade said: “The great thing about this area is you can arrange deals where you are the only ones who get it.”

3. Geolocation



Smartphones are equipped with location services that allow us to use map or weather functions, but also let mobile carriers know where we are at any time. That data can be valuable to see what shops, hotels or restaurants we are visiting, a gold mine for hedge funds looking for clues on consumer trends.

Hedge funds have always sought an advantage, whether by taking executives out for lavish dinners to glean a sense of how their business was doing, or hiring pollsters to conduct their own surveys ahead of elections or referendums. Increased regulation and a crackdown on insider trading have reduced some of those avenues, but alternative data can offer different routes.

The biggest challenge for investors is the sheer extent of how much digital information is generated every day. There are more than 1bn websites with more than 10tn individual web pages, with 500 exabytes (or 500bn gigabytes) of data, according to Deutsche Bank. And more than 100m websites are added to the internet every year.

To help navigate through the morass, an expanding range of companies offer to scrape, clean and sell this data to the investment community. They sit between the generators of information — such as app stores, telephone and credit card companies or social media sites — and the buyers of the data.

Alternative Data Insider, an information provider backed by YipitData, one of the vendors, has counted more than 100 companies in the field, with money pouring in. SpaceKnow, a satellite imaging company that looks for clues on economic activity in China and Africa, raised \$4m this year, while Prattle, a sentiment analysis company that uses artificial intelligence to turn material such as central bank speeches into tradable intelligence, raised \$3.3m.

4. Satellite imagery



In previous decades an investor might send a junior trainee to a local shopping mall to count how many visitors it gets, or to local farms to check on the health of the latest barley crop. Such information gathering can now be done more comprehensively and automatically by accessing the data of satellite “eyes in the sky”.

“Alternative data will only be alternative for so long, eventually becoming a core part of any portfolio manager’s toolkit,” Greenwich Associates, a market consultancy, wrote in a recent [industry report](#).

There is no suggestion that any hedge fund or alternative data vendor are doing anything illegal by using these new digital data sets. But lawyers urge caution, arguing that some aspects of the business, such as how providers collect the information they sell to hedge funds, and whether it is legal for funds to enter into “exclusivity” agreements with providers, are attracting the interest of regulators and prosecutors concerned that hedge funds are getting an unfair market advantage. The laissez-faire attitude of some of their colleagues and parts of the data vendor community is also under scrutiny.

Hedge funds also worry that some vendors do not do a good enough job of scrubbing personally identifiable data from their troves of information. Many therefore have dedicated internal teams that clean the data before

it is involved in the investment process. Indeed, some hedge fund managers say they would welcome federal regulators such as the Securities and Exchange Commission taking a closer look at alternative data.

“It’s like the Wild West and ultimately it will come under the purview of the regulators,” says one fund manager, who says legal opinions on the subject vary. “I have yet to see a clean legal opinion on all this. And we’ve looked for one.”

Hedge funds have good reason to be wary. After a series of arrests from 2010, the industry was upended when dozens of traders, portfolio managers and analysts were prosecuted for using information they gleaned from so-called “expert-network” companies which, like data vendors, tried to match investors with information.

The Wall Street traders used company insiders, doctors and others to expand their knowledge of industry trends or companies. The authorities cracked down when traders got their hands on confidential information, such as unpublished drug trial results.

Alternative data provision is a fast-growing niche

Number of providers



Source: Alternativedata.org
© FT

To break insider trading rules an individual needs to act on “material, non-public information” received in violation of a duty to keep it confidential. While lawyers say the data sets sold must be material by definition because an investor is willing to pay for them, the vendors typically have permission to sell the aggregate data once a user clicks the box agreeing to terms and conditions. But with few legal precedents and different standards between countries or even states in the US there is little clarity.

Mr Streeter of Dechert believes it will probably be a high bar for prosecutors to bring insider trading charges against funds that have used data not deemed to be public. For instance, mobile geolocation data, which can show how many people visit Walmart, Sears or Ralph Lauren over a given period, could well be viewed as material information, and if 50 hedge funds pay say \$100,000 for exclusive use of the data, it would be hard to argue that it is public. The crux is whether the owners of the information, such as AT&T or Verizon, have received consent from their customers to sell it on to third parties, he says.

“You look in the small print and there’s probably somewhere in there that says Verizon can sell that data. Verizon would then sign an agreement with a data provider. So under US law [there would be] no breach of duty, no insider trading,” the former prosecutor says.

Many more vendors scrape information from websites, and even if it is in the public domain lawyers say they may not always have the legal right to sell it on to third parties.

Obstacles to use of alternative data by asset managers and hedge funds

Per cent



Source: Greenwich Associated
© FT

Rado Lipus, head of Neudata, which vets data sets on behalf of investment groups, says “exclusive data sets are a double-edged sword”. While they can be profitable, they are clearly not public data and some investors — especially bigger ones — prefer to avoid them to avert even a whiff of controversy. Several large hedge funds