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Airbnb

To increase data skills, Airbnb has started its own university

This year, 700 data science students have studied at Airbnb's in-house academy

By **BONNIE CHRISTIAN**
07 Dec 2017

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Credit **Yukai Du**

In Airbnb offices around the world, graduates parade about with their college logo splashed across shirts, hats and computers. But they haven't come from your typical school - each is a graduate of Data University, a programme launched by Airbnb to increase the number of employees with data skills. "It's fun to walk around and see people wearing Data U T-shirts," says Elena Grewal, the company's head of data science.

The Data University course is split into three levels, starting with the basics - such as how to ask a good question of data - and moving through to more advanced skills such as machine learning. These lessons are applied to the kind of data Airbnb collects from its users. For example, employees could monitor how visitors interact with site redesigns, or analyse how many of its hosts use the company's professional photography services and in which location. The school has already toured Airbnb offices in Portland, Dublin, Singapore, Beijing and Seoul, with 700 students taking part in the first year.

So far, it's been a success. "We do see an uptake in our data tooling usage which is another sign that people are engaging with data more," says Grewal. "That's a really good sign that we see that increase after the fact so we're really excited to see that people are getting their data now in a way they didn't before." The classes will continue to be rolled out across Airbnb offices around the world and other companies have been asking about how it could work for them. "It's about how you make good decisions as a company and how you understand your users," she says.

This article was first published in the December 2017 issue of WIRED magazine
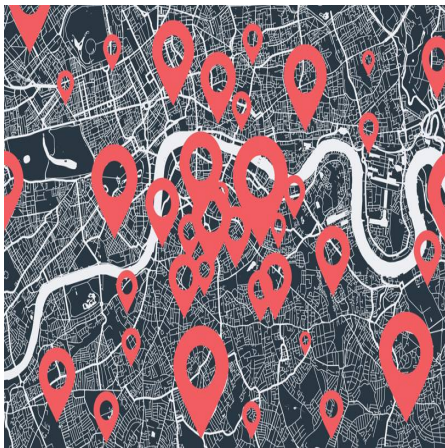
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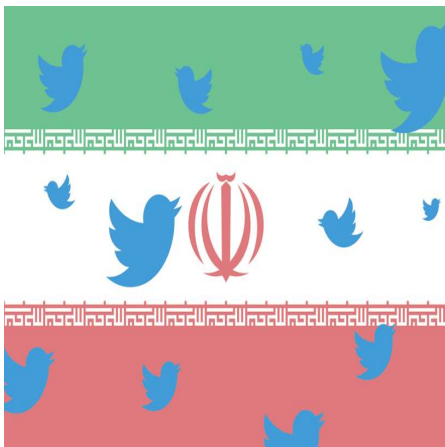## NHS DeepMind deal broke data protection law, regulator rules

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The Moderators

How the Reddit Bureau of Investigation solves mysteries while avoiding witch hunts

The RBI aims to help solve posters' puzzles, but with strict rules to prevent online manhunts and dangerous meddling

By **AMELIA TAIT**

Credit **Wikimedia / WIRED**

On April 16, 2013, a day after three people lost their lives when terrorists detonated two homemade bombs during the annual Boston Marathon, a new subreddit was created. "Find Boston Bombers" was a place for Redditors to attempt to identify the culprits of the attack – a crowdsourced investigation that gained momentum when the FBI published photos of suspects two days later.

What happened next is an infamous disaster. Redditors wrongly accused a missing 22-year-old student named Sunil Tripathi of perpetrating the attack, and the Tripathi family was inundated with intimidating phone calls day and night. On April 23, Sunil Tripathi's body was found, the cause of death ruled as suicide by drowning. Though the student did not take his life as a result of the online manhunt (he went missing on March 16), the Reddit furore troubled his family at an already difficult time.

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"The Boston Bomber incident still remains one of the worst incidents to happen on Reddit," says Naveen Cherian, a 27-year-old content developer from India who has moderated Reddit's answer to the FBI for three years. "RBI has learned from the mistakes of other subs and is committed to providing a crowdsourced platform based on ethics." Cherian says the RBI's moderating framework leaves "no way" to repeat the catastrophic errors of the Boston Bomber sub.

There are just two rules in the RBI sidebar. Number one: no criminal matters should be discussed in the sub. "The police are the only ones who can help you with criminal matters," the rule reads. "If you have a criminal matter, please contact the police. After the police have fully conducted their investigation or if the investigation has gone cold, you can ask the people of /r/RBI." Rule two states that no personal information should be shared publicly. "This includes addresses, phone numbers, or any other personally identifiable information." However, this information can be shared "via PM" (private messages direct to someone's inbox).

"Since we are particular that we will not entertain criminal matters, we don't really have to worry about vigilantism," explains Cherian, who says the community use Reddit's reporting tools to help the moderators keep on top of problematic posts. Cherian also says the sub has "automatic systems" that remove posts where users post private email addresses and phone numbers.

The most popular RBI posts in the last month are a fascinating read, ranging from the simple and life-affirming (one user found a wedding ring in his Amazon package and wanted to return it to its owner) to the more complicated and disturbing (one post alleges there is a hate ring of people who like to watch baby monkeys being abused on YouTube). The RBI's success rate does not seem especially high, but the sub's discussions always seem sincerely helpful – users are pointed to missing persons databases, provided with phone numbers for obscure organisations that can help them, or simply given sympathy.

DJ Nalley, a licensed private investigator from South Carolina who is in his early 40s, has been moderating RBI for over a year. Nalley says his job helps him to be "accepted" as a mod within the community, but he personally avoids getting involved in investigations. "I investigate for a living, so while I'm occasionally happy to point people in the right direction, I don't want to work for free."

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that happened in the house. The RBI theorised that the ex-husband had planted a recording device in her home which transmitted recordings back to him; these transmissions were then picked up by the daughter's headphones ("like how radio stations can sometimes be heard out of computer speakers").

After the woman went to the police on the advice of the RBI (she called the sub's comments "the most helpful information"), she posted again a few weeks later. In her new post, she says a WiFi-capable recording device was found under her mantle piece. Because of the subreddit's rules and the fact the investigation was ongoing, she could no longer post about it.

"To those people who say that we shouldn't have /r/RBI anymore [after the Boston Bomber incident], I'd encourage them to look at today's RBI," says Nalley. "We don't discuss criminal investigations, we do our best to immediately squelch people who are looking at criminal acts, trying to besmirch others' reputations, incite anything resembling vigilantism, or stalk or dox someone."

Yet despite this, Nalley still understands that things can easily get out of hand. "I've seen everything," he says – from people getting doxxed to "people posting the names and locations of people they claimed sexually assaulted them, as if the 'Right Honorable Court of Reddit' was in session to judge them for their crimes." Nalley says he is most concerned when the subreddit tries to help people find alleged wrongdoers or long lost relatives, because they could easily be assisting a stalker.

It doesn't take long to find alarming posts on RBI. There is a picture of a jeep alongside an allegation that its owner is a "graveyard thief" who steals flowers and gifts left on people's graves – one Redditor advises planting a GPS tracker in one of the gifts, while another used Google Maps to find homes with similar cars parked in their driveways. The user asks the original poster to PM them for the addresses of these homes. A disaster like the Boston Bomber incident might not unfold openly on RBI, but it's not particularly hard to imagine things getting out of control in private messages.

"My senses tingle whenever I see 'Please PM me' posts," says Peter Hipson, an "over 65"-year-old retired university professor who has been moderating RBI for a few months. "Most don't know who that person they PM really is."

Hipson, who is also the sole moderator of r/PayPal, says he was brought on as an RBI mod because he "loves banning" people. On RBI, people get banned for breaking the

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The mods each have slightly different perspectives on the sub's work. Nalley seems the most cautious, even saying he is sometimes "frightened" by the liability of some of the posts. He also believes the Boston Bomber incident shows the "limitations on the amount of information you can actually derive from an internet investigation" as well as "the potential harm it can easily bring".

Though Cherian is also cautious, he is also clearly very optimistic about the benefits of the RBI. "The fun lies in working with the community figuring out tiny clues," he says, citing everything from obscure inscriptions to car number plates. "One of my proudest times was when we were able to figure out the number plate of a hit and run from a gas station camera and based on the looks and make of the vehicle in question, pass on the information to the police."

In the end, these are the stories RBI would like to be known for – though they are not necessarily the stories that dominate the subreddit on a daily basis. On the day of writing, some of the newest posts are entitled: "How to find out if online friend died?"; "Received DMs from a man sharing horrific fantasies of murdering his sister"; and "Need to replace garage drain cover but don't know what it's called".

The stakes on RBI are high: failure to properly moderate the sub could result in disaster. Conversely, success stories are slightly less satisfying than users might hope: the most interesting stories become police matters and can't be included in the sub. Still, Cherian says the sub's main strength is simply gathering information.

His [favourite story](#) involves a wedding ring a user claimed to find as a child and had kept for 20 years. "He posted the engravings and other details and the community was able to figure out to whom it belonged," Cherian says (users started sleuthing based on the wedding date and initials engraved on the ring).

"Unfortunately both the bride and groom had passed away," the moderator explains. "But we were able to track down marriage certificates and the grave where they were interred."

The Moderators is a semi-regular series in which we speak to the gatekeepers of different online communities to find out how they approach being the arbiter of what is and isn't allowed on the internet. Read how village Facebook groups [tackle kebab van disagreements and dog poop vigilantism](#).

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