

#WeAreNotRobots

**DATA  
ABOUT  
US**



This paper summarises the findings of a project by the RSA (Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce), the Open Data Institute (ODI) and Luminate exploring narratives around data rights and data ownership: how people feel about data about them, and how we can find ways to talk about data that everyone can understand and engage with.

We have also made a video that captures people's perspectives and explores our data shadows using shadow puppets, and a graphic explaining the types of data about us.

Watch the video, download the graphic and read the full report at [thersa.org/data-about-us](https://thersa.org/data-about-us)



**We have explored  
how members of the  
UK public feel about  
data about them.**

**We have heard that  
they know and care  
more than they have  
been given credit for.**

People have told us they want greater...

**HONESTY**  
AND  
**TRANSPARENCY**

**AGENCY**  
AND  
**CONTROL**

**COMPLIANCE**  
AND  
**ENFORCEABILITY**

**RIGHTS**  
AND  
**RESPONSIBILITY**

**CONTENT**  
AND  
**FAIRNESS**

# OUR DATA LIVES ARE COMPLICATED

**Never before has data played such an integral and granular role in how we live.** On a daily basis, we are asked to make decisions about personal data about us – consenting to it being gathered and used for many purposes.

We are only just starting to grasp the impact that these decisions have on us, and others. We must think differently about data, and the rights and responsibilities around it.

We must engage with and listen to people about how they feel, and stop writing off ‘the public’ as being complacent or ignorant about data protection issues, as they often are by people in power and in the media.

Recently, ‘data ownership’ has been raised by some as a possible way to give us control over the data about us. But, given that data about us is rarely just about us as individuals, but usually about other people too, many have criticised ownership as an overly simplistic solution. Critics have said that instead we need to strengthen our ‘data rights’ and the responsibilities to maintain them, with a more systemic approach including legislation, regulation, policy-making, education and advocacy.

“  
**There’s loads of people watching everything you do, and they’re all making a guess about what I am like...  
I just like to browse. Sometimes I’m not even browsing for me. It’s for someone else.**  
”

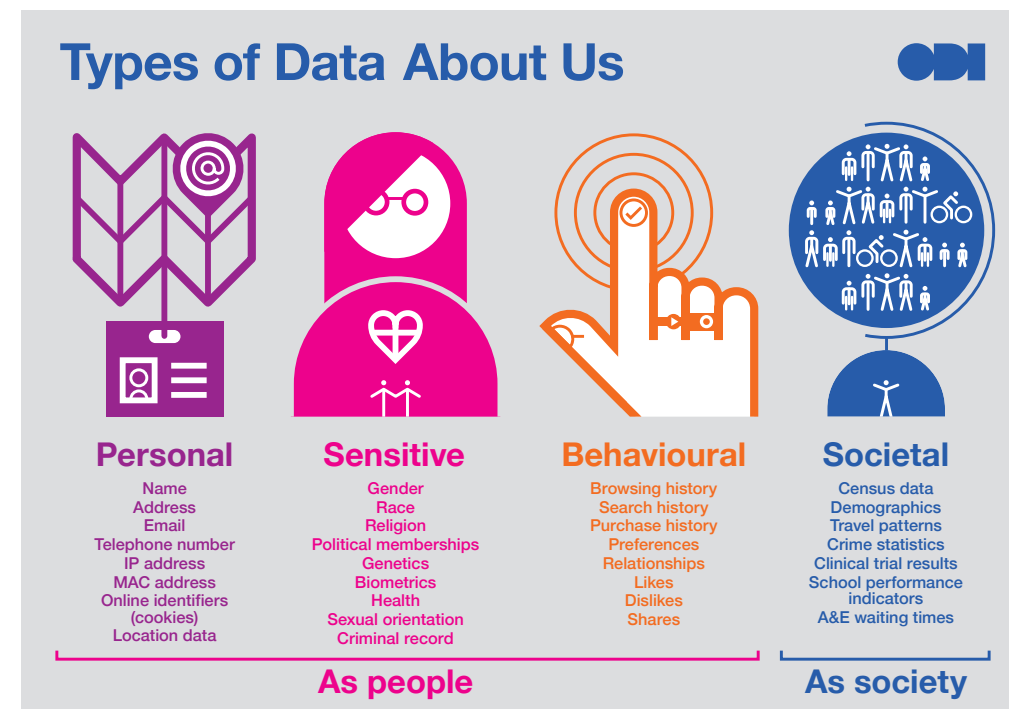
# WHAT WE DID

“  
I think the only  
point we own data  
is when it's  
within ourselves,  
and as soon  
as you reveal it,  
you don't own it.  
”

We explored how members of the UK public feel about data about them, about having ownership or rights around it, and what kind of control or protection they feel is missing or needs strengthening. We did this over the course of two focus groups and a workshop, in London.

To help, we developed a graphic that explains the different types of data about us: **'personal data'**, **'sensitive data'**, **'behavioural data'** and **'societal data'**. We also tested and developed compelling narratives to help people understand and explore these different types of data in context.

We did this because we saw it can be hard for people to decide how they feel about sharing data about them, without being able to consider the different elements or ways it is used. Sharing sensitive data about us so a company can target us with adverts is different from sharing societal data about us – data that should be aggregated and anonymised – so it can be used to improve public services for everyone.



This graphic is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 UK. International Licence.

“

**Yeah, they can know that  
for society and stuff,  
but not to just get  
more money out of me...  
I feel like for society,  
for transport and energy,  
I don't mind them knowing.**

”

“

**I feel like we need to be educated.  
Like, when I sign up to a website,  
when I do my banking,  
when I do anything on the internet,  
and then they ask me  
'Do you accept these terms and conditions?  
Give me your name',  
I have no idea where all that's going.  
I just feel like I can't do anything unless  
I give my data away.**

”

# WHAT PEOPLE TOLD US

People told us that they generally feel positive about the benefits brought by the internet and being more connected, but want greater **honesty and transparency, agency and control, rights and responsibility, context and fairness, and compliance and enforceability** over how data about them is used.

People said they want to know why, how, when and for what purpose data about them is held and shared. They want to be asked to 'opt in', not 'opt out' of it being collected and used.

They said they are happy to share data about them for societal benefits, but want to understand and have a say in what it is used for. They want to be able to decide how data about them is shared, and have the freedom to change their minds.

Emphasising the importance of context and fairness, people said they are uncomfortable with data about them being used in automated decision-making that makes assumptions about who they are based on how they behave. They do not want the news they see to be automatically filtered based on presumptions about what they are interested in.

They said they worry that the value of data sharing is felt more by companies than themselves.

They want **companies** to take greater responsibility for honestly communicating what is happening to data about them. They said that **governments** should regulate and enable this, that regulation should not be financially motivated, and that it should be overseen by **independent bodies** like commissioners or ombudsmen.

Contrary to the assumptions often made around public awareness, many people said they understand the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) and want them to be strengthened. They see it as a helpful structure of rights and responsibilities for their data lives.

Ultimately, they want to know that where data is concerned they will be treated as people, not as robots.

“  
Trying to get something back off the internet is like trying to take the piss back out of a swimming pool.  
”

# WHAT NEXT?

Give people the chance to talk and meaningfully engage in debates about data, and they will bring important insight into the development of future rights, responsibilities, regulations, policies and products.

We have asked the public what they think data about us, the rights we have, and the responsibilities that governments and businesses should have to strengthen our data rights.

We heard important perspectives from a small group of people. We want to build on this and hear how more people feel.

We want to start a conversation between people, governments and businesses, along with NGOs, interest groups and think-tanks. We want to discuss the rights we have, and the responsibilities that governments, businesses and all of us should have. We want to strengthen our data rights.

Follow the conversation and share your views on Twitter at **#WeAreNotRobots**.

“

**We've got to learn to be responsible online and not be so impulsive. There's a lot of impulsiveness. And also corporations have got to learn to be responsible and open about what they're doing about it.**

”







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NOT  
ROBOTS**