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Striking a balance with big data



By **Dr Sodiq Omoola** - February 16, 2019 @ 12:16am

JAN 28 is celebrated as Data Privacy Day each year to raise awareness of and promote data privacy education. The drivers of big data are individual emails, instant messages, social media posts, data files, document files and scanned images.

With increased velocity, volume, value and variety of data, the public and private sectors have become more datafied with the emergence of big data analytics.

On the part of the government, big data has been identified as a tool to enhance social knowledge in public service delivery with huge potential for government healthcare, security surveillance, weather data and traffic patterns.

Often, the government has no idea how to optimise and harness this data and use it for good, while tech giants with the know-how have hit a gold mine due to the limitless commercial potential in huge personal data.

As it stands, tech giants such as Amazon, Facebook, Google, Microsoft and Apple represent the private corporations which have made products that users cannot stop using — the addiction is real. This enables them to hold enormous amount of personal data which are primarily put to

commercial use through targeted advertisements. In the wake of the Cambridge analytical scandal, political use of big data has been identified as a threat to democratic processes.

Based on claims of “improving user experience”, tech giants have continued to use complex algorithms to obtain personal data and use big data analytics to place monetary value on this humongous data.

While not everyone cares about the use of his or her data, it has become incumbent on governments to protect the privacy of citizens from unconscionable data mining and misuse.

In Malaysia, the promotion of the big data analytic ecosystem is under the purview of the Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation (MDec) which seeks to harness foreign and domestic potentials of the digital economy. The agency has also implemented programmes on awareness and adoption of big data and supported data science in the academic curriculum in Malaysia.

The two main offences by data users under the Personal Data Protection Act 2010 are failure to obtain consent from data subjects and processing personal data without being registered.

Recently, Google was fined €50 million (RM230 million) for personal data violation under the European Union-General Data Protection Regulation (EU-GDPR). According to *Business Insider*, the US Federal Trade Commission is expected to slam an unprecedented fine on Facebook and Google Inc for similar infringement under the United States regulation.

The taxes and sanctions imposed on these corporations show that there is an uneasy relationship between both sides while the interest of tech users remains at stake. One way to establish a balance is to seek legislative mechanisms that mandate tech giants to align big data analytics towards improving the lives of citizens in their country of operation.

Beyond economic use of big data, MDec needs to sensitise Malaysian companies and startups to ensure compliance with the PDPA Act 2010 and EU-GDRP. Section 47 of the PDPA grants wide powers to the commissioner for personal data protection and every data-driven enterprise in Malaysia should be wary of infringements.

It is recommended that countries seek regulatory mechanisms to find a balance with the tech giants. Such a balance can be achieved when the social knowledge acquired through big data is deployed to provide an insight into behavioural health, identifying depression, suicidal tendencies, addiction and other wellbeing goals.

By doing this, governments can make informed decisions while creating a sustainable relationship with tech companies.

DR SODIQ OMOOLA

Assistant Professor, Ahmad Ibrahim Kulliyah of Laws, International Islamic University Malaysia

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