Case studies on Data Collection in the Public and Nonprofit Sectors

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The following case studies were developed for a class discussion on the ethics of “big data.”
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Case Study: Educational Data Collection

You are a school superintendent in a medium sized school district in the United States. Your State Department of Education is piloting a new online program that will easily allow teachers in schools K-12 to collect and locally store student data. The system also automatically reports the data to the state. The student data that is to be collected ranges from contact information to standardized test scores to social-emotional development to “at-risk” indicators (like absences and suspensions). As the superintendent, you see the tremendous value in opting-in to the program. It allows your schools and teachers to easily track students’ progress in school and identify students who are at-risk for falling behind or dropping out. Even better, the state will install and maintain the system for you, at no cost to the school. But recently, you have been contacted by numerous parents in the community. They are outraged that the state is collecting and storing and analyzing information about their children. They are extremely concerned about the potential for data breaches and don’t want their children’s information being used for any purpose. They don’t want their children “pigeonholed”, “labeled” or “tracked for life by Big Brother”. These parents are aware that the state is federally required to collect some basic information on their children but are vehemently opposed to any additional data collection, no matter the purpose. In contrast, your school district’s attorney informs you that the system is Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) compliant and doesn’t violate other privacy laws. Teachers, principals and state officials are overall supportive of the system because they see tremendous benefit in having access to tons of student data that can be used to improve schools, teaching, etc.

As superintendent, it is at your discretion whether or not to opt-in to the new state-wide system. You realize this decision raises ethical questions. Do you prioritize the collective benefits to the schools over the concerns of some individual parents...Or do you prioritize the rights of individual parents over the preferences of the state?

Articles for Context:


Case Study: Selling Client Data

You are the director of a nonprofit health center located in DC. Your health center serves a variety of patients with varying needs, yet one of the largest services offered is substance abuse treatment. Your clinic offers patients a wide variety of services to deal with substance abuse, and your clinic is known for high-quality services that are offered in a way that is not judgmental of client behavior. Many of your clients are low-income and could not afford to receive services elsewhere.

To better support your clients, the caseworkers at your clinic collect a large amount of data on client behavior—from frequency of visits to demographic information to number of relapses. All clients sign a disclosure giving permission for this data to be collected and shared internally and externally in an anonymized form. A pharmaceutical company contacts you to see if you’d be interested in a partnership where the company obtains access to your client data to better develop and market their medication designed to decrease addiction among substance abusers. The company only needs anonymized data, so no identifying client data will be passed on to the company. This partnership will not force your doctors into any sort of agreement to purchase or prescribe certain products—they are free to make decisions based on their professional judgment.

In exchange for a data partnership, the company would be willing to compensate the organization for its time and resources expended. Your clinic is extremely underfunded, and the compensation the company is offering would help stabilize your budget.

Do you accept the company’s offer to sell your clients’ data?

Would your answer be different if you were the head of a plastic surgery clinic in a DC suburb that mostly served wealthy clients, and the company produced medication used within plastic surgery procedures?

Articles for Context:


Case Study: Surveillance, Security and Privacy

A young NSA contractor, let’s call him Teddy S., stumbles upon documents that outline a vast surveillance program which collects large amounts of personal communications data on American citizens and other individuals around the world. The program was originally designed to monitor terrorist groups, as well as prevent attacks on America and its allies, but since has grown in size and scope. Teddy S. felt that the program was too invasive and it was his moral duty to expose it to the American public. He sends the documents to a reporter, and promptly moves to an island nation where he is safe from arrest.

After the surveillance program is made public, the NSA is forced to eliminate its tracking programs and devise new ways to monitor terrorist activity. While designing new tracking methods, a terrorist attack occurs on an American embassy that the NSA had no inclination would happen. Two Americans die. While this failure by the NSA cannot be directly linked to the re-tooling of the surveillance program, critics of Teddy’s actions blame him, at least by extension, for the deaths.

Is Teddy responsible for the deaths of these people? Or is he a national hero fighting against government oversight?

Articles for Context:

