

Policy Influence & Ethical Considerations in the Use of Measurement Data

Measurement data is often used to influence policymaking, either by people that collect data and/or run measurement platforms or by others that use the resulting data. Unfortunately, such data often can be misused when attempting to influence policymaking. This raises the question of whether there is a need for discussion concerning the ethical use of Internet measurement data and the “dos and don’ts” of influencing policy¹.

Measurements are typically designed & run with careful attention to a problem statement or question, so that the measurement system is fit to purpose. A primary focus tends to be on ensuring that the system is free from undocumented influences, that it can reliably meet design objectives and so on – as matters of technical precision and operational excellence - and ethical use of data may not be a focus.

But what ethical considerations arise in the course of or after the conduct of Internet measurement? Are these considerations limited to design and operation of systems or experiments? What about the use – or mis-use - of the resulting measurement data by the researcher or a third party? What about cases where someone is very publicly using a measurement dataset to reach a conclusion that cannot be supported by the measurement? Does the measurement professional have an ethical responsibility to correct those public statements and/or to explain why the measurement system cannot be used to reach a particular concern? And what risks may arise for the broader measurement community if data is mis-used and trust in measurement data declines as a result (e.g., labeled ‘fake news’).

While Internet measurement for many years was a discipline that was rather behind the scenes, today these datasets are being used in the process of making multi-billion-dollar decisions relating to Internet deployment (e.g., government grant programs), as well as significant regulatory, legislative, and policymaking decisions that have multi-billion dollar or even trillion-dollar implications.

As a result, it seems that the measurement community faces several key questions as the value and influence of Internet measurement data has significantly increased. Does this community have a responsibility to increase its focus on the ethics of data use and frameworks for policy influence? Should ethical data use guidelines be discussed & developed? What forms of Conflict-of-Interest disclosure are appropriate and useful for the measurement community, especially when influencing policy? In addition, is there a need for some sort of review committee to which complaints about misuse of data can be filed or escalated as a form of self-regulation – similar to intra-industry adjudication or mediation boards such as the National Advertising Review Board?

¹ See “The dos and don’ts of influencing policy: a systematic review of advice to academics” in Nature, 19 February 2019, at <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-019-0232-y>.