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Should we be concerned about greater use of personal data during Covid-19?

Leading academics from Northumbria University, Newcastle, are carrying out research to investigate whether an increased use of digital information as part of the UK's response to Covid-19 could lead to a break down in public trust.

The work, entitled *Observatory for Monitoring Data-Driven Approaches to COVID-19 (OMDDAC)*, will be led by Marion Oswald from Northumbria Law School in partnership with the Royal United Services Institute ([RUSI](#)). It will focus upon legal, ethical, policy and operational challenges for data-driven

responses being developed rapidly. These include combining digital health datasets within a single dashboard, use of communications data to map trends, monitoring of quarantine behaviour by drones and automated number plate recognition, and access to Bluetooth data for contact tracing.

Funding for the project has come from the Arts and Humanities Research Council ([AHRC](#)) as part of UK Research and Innovation ([UKRI's](#)) rapid response to COVID-19.

Marion Oswald, Vice-Chancellor's Senior Fellow in Law at Northumbria, said: "Data-driven responses to COVID-19 are being developed at speed across the public sector, academia and commercial sector. While the incentive for moving fast is understandable, developing technology without appropriate consideration of the contextual background and resulting interventions brings with it a high risk of errors, limited efficacy and unintended consequences for individuals. These risks are particularly pronounced for already disadvantaged sections of the population with low levels of trust in government. Our Observatory will work to counter these risks by analysing these responses and collating lessons learned and guidelines for future data-driven responses to pandemics."

OMDDAC is a collaboration between Northumbria and RUSI, including researchers with technology law, data protection law, medical law, practical ethics, computer science, data science, applied statistics in health, technology studies and behavioural science expertise. Project partners and advisers include the Ada Lovelace Institute, CDEI, medConfidential and Lord Jonathan Evans of Weardale.

In particular, the research will investigate operational challenges arising from data acquisition and analysis, technology development and implementation. Legal and ethical challenges encountered during development will also be covered, along with governance and policy challenges. OMDDAC will capture and synthesize lessons learned in these three areas and make recommendations on how they can be addressed for future policy and governance of data science innovation projects.

Professor George Marston, Pro Vice-Chancellor for Research and Innovation at Northumbria, added: "OMDDAC's researchers have a track record of influencing public sector policy and practice and they will be able to draw on a powerful and multi-disciplinary range of practical and academic expertise

to address vital questions around efficacy of data-driven approaches and impact on individual rights. Securing funding for this project is yet another clear example of how Northumbria's world-renowned research is making a positive impact on some of the most pressing issues facing society today."

OMDDAC is one of four successful research bids worth in excess of £1.2 million, secured by Northumbria recently as part of UKRI's rapid response to the challenges of Covid-19.

As principal investigator and OMDDAC Director, Marion Oswald will be joined in the research project by

Alexander Babuta, Research Fellow, RUSI and OMDDAC Co-Director, and senior researchers at Northumbria Dr Mark Warner and Dr Matthew Higgs from Computer and Information Sciences, Dr Guangquan Li from the Department of Mathematics, Physics and Electrical Engineering, and Associate Professors Claire Bessant and Charlotte Emmett from Northumbria Law School.

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Notes to editors:

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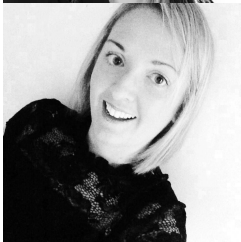


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