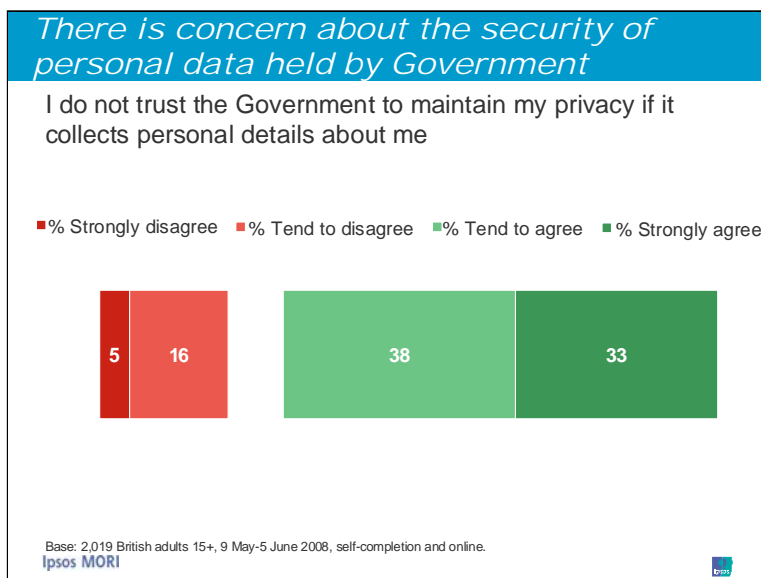


Data security and privacy: what do the public think?

By Heike Friemert and Emily Gray

New technology has made it possible to share data almost immediately. This unprecedented interconnectedness has profoundly altered the way we interact with each other and with service providers. Much of this is seen as positive – most of us are happy to access news as it happens, have a chat with friends and family online, or use online retailers. All of these require vast amounts of data, and many people express ambiguous feelings about having third parties collect these. Our names, date of birth, address, financial information, and data on our health are all held by a range of public, private and voluntary sector organisations. With media coverage of lost USBs, discs and laptops containing private data, it is understandable that people express concern about whether their private information is safe.



Data from Ipsos MORI's Real Trends study, a survey of British public attitudes, values and behaviours, helps to shed light on public attitudes to data security. More than two in three (71%) say that they do not trust the Government to maintain their privacy if it collects their personal details. However, previous research carried out by Ipsos MORI in 2003 shows that when people are asked whether they trust *public services* to handle information responsibly, more than eight in ten (84%) agree. As this indicates, public scepticism in this instance may relate in part to a lack of trust in the Government in comparison with greater trust in public services generally.

Much depends on how the message is framed, with six in ten people (62%) who took part in the Real Trends study saying they agree that public services should share individuals' information with each other *so that they can get a quicker, more personalised and efficient service*. This means that in many cases the same person who expresses distrust in the Government's ability to guarantee the privacy of personal details also says that they support data sharing if it means improved service delivery. People's opinions on any given topic are rarely ever straightforward, and in our work we often find that the same person can hold apparently conflicting views about the same thing at the same time and still feel at ease - a phenomenon known as cognitive polyphasia.

Cognitive polyphasia – some examples

- Satisfaction with the NHS is at its highest recorded level (79% - almost four in five), but more than half of people still believe it is in crisis (56%).
- Concerns about specific crimes have fallen, but people at the same time say they believe that crime is out of control and that confidence in the government has collapsed.

But information sharing can improve public services

Public services should share the information they hold on individuals with each other so that they can get a quicker, more personalised and more efficient service

■ % Strongly disagree ■ % Tend to disagree ■ % Tend to agree ■ % Strongly agree



Base: 2,019 British adults 15+, 9 May-5 June 2008, self-completion and online.
Ipsos MORI

Most people say they are concerned about public services sharing personal information about them in general - with main concerns centring on a lack of control over their own information. Yet they tend to be less concerned when they are presented with specific scenarios, such as the NHS passing medical records to social care services to provide you with aftercare in the community, if you had been ill. We also know from previous research conducted in 2003 that levels of trust in public services handling information varies significantly across agencies – the police, health services and Passport Agency all enjoy better ratings than local councils, benefits agencies or Jobcentres.

Research also shows that issues of data sharing and privacy divide opinion within groups in society. For instance, when asked about their opinion on sharing data to improve service delivery, older people are more likely than younger people to agree with data sharing (63% of those aged 65+ agree, compared with 54% of those aged 15-29).

Moreover, evidence from our Real Trends study suggests that different groups of people are convinced by different arguments about data sharing and privacy. For example, although they are more wary of new technology, older people are more likely than other groups to think that only criminals or people with something to hide need to be worried about ID cards. Three in four people aged 65+ agree (76%) but this argument is less convincing for young people, of whom a significantly lower 58% agree.

This has important implications for communications strategies. Whether people express support for a particular policy depends not only on the policy itself, but also on how it is presented. Where there is a convincing argument or a palatable trade-off, people are much more likely to be receptive, but what is convincing will be different for different groups in society.

In short, the way in which communications messages are framed appears to have a considerable impact on people's propensity to support data sharing. This is also partly because it is not a top-of-mind issue for the public; despite its major implications for service delivery, it is not well understood among the wider public so their views may be less set in stone. Effective public communication of the case for data sharing remains a key challenge for public managers at the current time, given the importance of greater sharing of data between government departments and agencies as a tool in helping to create genuinely joined-up government. Though there is also a need to balance this with valid views and concerns about this and the changes around it.

Real Trends is an Ipsos MORI service which aims to understand socio-cultural change in British society in a way that is meaningful and underpinned by extensive quantitative research data. Solid evidence and analysis enable us to show how public attitudes and behaviours shift over time, with some historical data points from 1997, 1999, 2003 and 2005. The research covers a host of issues relevant to the public sector, such as:

- Perceptions of economic and financial security
- Social mobility, aspirations and self-development
- Nostalgia and the future of multiculturalism
- Crime and anti-social behaviour
- Families and parental responsibility
- Health and body consciousness
- Environmental attitudes and behaviours

To find out more about Real Trends and what it might mean for your organisation, please contact Emily Gray on 020 7347 3000 (Emily.gray@ipsos.com).

Unless stated otherwise, all percentages in this article refer to the findings of the Real Trends survey; 2,019 British adults 15+, 9 May – 5 June 2008, self-completion and online.