

# Don't know how your data is used, or how to protect it? You're not alone, but you can improve your data literacy

October 22 2021, by Simeon Yates, Elinor Carmi

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We measured data literacy in the UK between 2019 and 2021. Credit: Cytonn Photography/Unsplash

Discussions about how Facebook operates have been high on the agenda

over the past week [as the US Congress investigates](#) the platform's impact. At the core of these discussions are questions of how Facebook uses data that we, as users, generate.

Similar questions can be asked of all the [digital services](#) we use, whether run by companies, governments, or other organizations. These platforms use our data to determine what content we see or which services we're offered. Whether we realize it or not, this can affect our lives in a variety of ways.

But how well do people understand these issues? Do they have a handle on the ways their data is being used? Do they know how to protect it from being used in ways they disagree with?

If you feel your knowledge in this space is lacking, you're not alone. We explored these sorts of questions in our "[Me and My Big Data](#)" project and found UK citizens' "data literacy" to be quite low. Even for people with greater digital skills and broad digital engagement, their understanding of data issues might be best described as patchy.

When we're talking about data, this can encompass anything from data we "share" on Facebook, to data covertly extracted from us such as our location and the device we're using. The concept of data literacy has multiple overlapping components, from basic skills inputting data and sharing information, to thinking critically about data, to engaging with data issues.

In a survey of 1,542 UK citizens, we measured data literacy by collecting information on more than 100 behaviors and attitudes, and asking questions to ascertain participants' knowledge of how digital platforms work.

Using a model we developed for a [previous research](#) project, we split our

respondents into six different groups, ranging from "extensive" users who undertake a wide range of internet activity, to "limited" and "non-users." We're not as digital a nation as you might think. Both [our prior work](#) and this survey indicate that limited and non-users account for about 50% of the UK population.

As you might expect, extensive users scored highest on our data literacy measures, and limited users lowest. Having a post-18 education was a key predictor of higher data literacy too. But on average even extensive users were not fully aware of the main uses to which platforms put their data, or how it's shared and sold.

Very few people proactively managed their privacy settings to protect their data. Almost none of our respondents had read the terms and conditions detailing what platforms can do with their data. Only the more extensive users were likely to actively engage with data issues, such as by helping a friend with their privacy settings, or taking part in debates about the use of data.

## **People feel disempowered**

In addition to our [national survey](#), discussions with 14 focus groups allowed us to explore people's experiences and perceptions in greater depth. Three key themes came out of these discussions.

First, many limited users struggle to articulate, or are not aware of, the types of data being collected—especially those who primarily use social media.

Second, people often blame themselves for a lack of skills, rather than arguing for improvements in the platforms' operations. As one participant (a 21-year-old female with post-18 education) noted: "It is horrible the fact that they're taking all your data, all your data's out there

[...] but then that all comes down to the terms and conditions as well which I don't really read [...] so I guess that's my own fault."

Finally, most people are very aware that their data is being harvested and used, even if they are not sure of which data and how. But they are quite uncomfortable with this being the "price" of access to services. One participant (a 24-year-old male with no post-18 education) said: "[Facebook] is useful, and it is creepy at the same time because it's kind of like they're spying on you."

Overall, we would describe our respondents as feeling disempowered—unable to proactively control what is done with their data.

## Being a data citizen

We see stronger data literacy as necessary to support "[digital and data citizens](#)" who can make meaningful claims about their own and their community's digital and data rights. For example, asserting what constitutes acceptable use of their data by big tech, government and organizations.

If you're looking to improve your own data literacy, take the time to do the following things:

1. Read up on how major platforms gather and use your data.
2. Explore and set your privacy options and settings on the key sites you use.
3. Explore alternative platforms for search and social media that don't track, share and sell your data.
4. Get proactive—help others with their digital skills and to protect their data online; join campaigns to improve our rights online.

It's very important that the state should play a key role in this. Through both school and post-school education, all citizens must be equipped with the core digital and data literacy—not just basic digital skills—to be able to critically engage with and challenge those who use their data.

Meanwhile, legislation should ensure that tech companies, government bodies and organizations using our [data](#) make the uses clear and enable the public to challenge these uses. Current policy and practice are a long way from this ideal.

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