Tech for Good: Data for Social Empowerment
Google DC
Washington D.C.
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Keynote Remarks of Commissioner Terrell McSweeny

  Thank you for having me here today as part of Google's DC Tech Talk series. I want to thank Susan Molinari for those kind opening remarks. I also want to extend my thanks to all the panelists who are joining the discussion today. I'm looking forward to what will certainly be an interesting conversation.

How this vast amount of data – our data – is handled, from its collection and use to its storage and protection, raises some of the thorniest issues policymakers face during this new Information Age. These are complex and important issues that have real and potentially harmful consequences for consumers – but they are not the focus of my talk this afternoon.

On the federal level, President Obama has been on the forefront of freeing up data for innovation for the public good. He not only appointed the first Chief Technology Officer and first US Chief Data Scientist, but also issued the Open Government Directive that was later codified as an executive order. Under President Obama, more than 130,000 data sets have been made available to the public for innovation and entrepreneurship on data.gov – with the necessary safeguards to prevent the release of sensitive and personally identifiable information.[6]

This has provided new tools empowering people in a variety of ways – creating methods for better weather forecasts, providing searchable stats about colleges for students and parents, improving our response to natural disasters, helping consumers lower their utility bills, enabling a new era of medicine by making treatment and prevention plans more personalized and effective, and much more.

And through Challenge.gov, agencies throughout the government are empowered to enlist the help of citizen innovators to solve public policy dilemmas. Data sets and other tools are released to the public, often a prize is created, then innovators and entrepreneurs create solutions.

For example, at the FTC we've used this platform to get help fighting robocalls, which thwart the Do Not Call list. Robocalls present particular enforcement challenges – defeating them is more or less like playing a game of whack-a-mole. A couple of years ago we held our first "FTC Robocall Challenge."[7] We made available the data collected on robo-calls such as the offending phone numbers, the times of day calls were most frequent, and the subject of the calls, then challenged developers to create their own solutions. The winner was a programmer named Aaron Foss. The service he founded, Nomorobo, is available to all consumers, and has so far stopped more than 36 million robocalls.

This year, our "Robocalls: Humanity Strikes Back" contest challenged entrants to develop technologies that automatically block and forward the unwanted calls to a crowd-sourced honey pot.[8] The winner, RoboKiller, uses audio fingerprint technology to identify calls and enables users to personalize their filtering settings.

These are terrific examples of how we in government can take our data, partner with the private sector, and develop innovative solutions to difficult problems.

Many of the other challenges focus on empowering Americans with information so they can make good decisions. We've seen challenges that have generated new apps addressing everything from tracking air quality to campus rape prevention to calculating the full cost of

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[6] DJ Patil, The White House Blog, "Two Years of Transformative Open Data for Public Good" (May 11, 2015), *available at* https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2015/05/11/two-years-transformative-open-data-public-good.

[7] *See* Press Release, Fed. Trade Comm'n, "FTC Announces Robocall Challenge Winners" (April 2, 2013), *available at* https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/press-releases/2013/04/ftc-announces-robocall-challenge-winners.

[8] *See* Press Release, Fed. Trade Comm'n, "FTC Awards $25,000 Top Cash Prize for Contest-Winning Mobile App That Blocks Illegal Robocalls" (Aug. 17, 2015), *available at* https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/press-releases/2015/08/ftc-awards-25000-top-cash-prize-contest-winning-mobile-app-blocks.

college tuition, to connecting veterans to job opportunities, even to providing help with where to eat and shop while on a military base.

For all the innovation and empowerment that can be unleashed by our data revolution, I think my colleague Commissioner Ohlhausen put it best by saying, "…big data isn't knowledge or wisdom."[9] It is a tool, and like any other tool, it can be used for good or ill.

That is where policy makers, data scientists, regulators, and enforcers come in, and it is where we at the FTC will have to take our consumer protection mission. To begin with, data can only positively affect people's lives if the data itself is good. Too often in this country, minorities, the poor, the disabled, the elderly, and new immigrants are not adequately counted.

For example, two years ago, the city of Boston unveiled an app called Street Bump. It allowed drivers to report potholes and other road hazards directly to the public works department from their smartphones. After a few weeks, the city began noticing that there were far more hazards and potholes in wealthy neighborhoods than in poorer areas of the city.[10] Clearly, the data collected was skewed. Wealthy people downloaded the app and drove private cars, while poorer people didn't have smartphones often took the bus. It became obvious to the city that an innovative and cost-effective way of tackling a nagging problem was exacerbating inequality.

In fact, many of the most intractable problems we face as a nation have their roots in how we gathered and used data as policy makers and businesses. It wasn't done with computers and algorithms, but for most of the twentieth century, banks and government agencies produced data sets on where, and for whom, loans could be made and houses could be sold. They created maps that redlined communities and enforced a rigid segregation based on race and class. This was big data used for discriminatory purposes, and it ha

working on our report on that workshop, it became clear to me that without transparency and oversight, consumers could face real harms.

Every day research reveals the subtle and not so subtle ways fusion of data can lead to situations in which different groups are served different kinds of information. For example, a study by Northeastern University revealed that consumers could pay different prices for the same product depending on the type of device a consumer used or the location of their device. Studies have also shown that homestay rentals offered by minorities, even in the same or better neighborhoods, have lower returns than those offered by white renters. I could go on.