

Everyone should decide how their digital data are used — not just tech companies | Nature

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Smartphones, sensors and consumer habits reveal much about society. Too few people have a say in how these data are created and used.

A few decades ago, if a researcher wanted to ask how bad weather affected commuting patterns — the transport modes people use, the routes they take, the times they travel — they might have surveyed hundreds of people and counted cars, buses and bikes at major junctions.

Today, it is possible to access data on the movements of millions of people, taken from location trackers in phones or vehicles, sometimes in real time. These data can be combined with analyses of COVID-19 vaccinations to investigate the effects of commuters returning to the office. And weather data can be incorporated to determine whether more people are now more likely to work from home when heavy rain hits than they were a few years ago.

In theory. Reality often falls far short of this rosy vision.

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