

## News, Comment and Reviews

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### *How can data destruction be a good thing?*

#### **Christina Beatty**

In 2007, the HMRC (HM Revenue & Customs) lost computer disks containing confidential data on all Child Benefit recipients. In the wake of such an appalling breach of confidentiality, procedures covering access to, and storage of, government data were rightly tightened significantly. However, have things now gone too far the other way? It is now standard practice for those undertaking research for DWP (Department for Work and Pensions) to have a clause within their contract which stipulates that: *'All Departmental Official Information, whether held in hard copy or electronically must either be returned or destroyed, ensuring that the information is both unreadable and irretrievable, when the project requiring access to that information has been completed.'* Whilst some data, such as survey data sets, can be anonymised and returned to DWP or deposited with the Data Archive, this is not a feasible plan of action for amended data sets or associated data files which contain all the manipulations, syntax or calculations underpinning any analysis undertaken as part of the project. Large amounts of confidential qualitative material may also have been collected, but funding does not exist to redact potentially disclosive information which is extremely labour intensive. Indeed, without local contextual data being included in transcripts this detracts from the meaning and power of the analysis possible. Given the large expense to the public purse that these major data collection exercises takes, if an academic institution adheres to strict data storage and protection procedures, shouldn't they be allowed to continue to hold on to data and make the most of it via the production of academic articles after the end of the project? This used to be the case and surely it should be once more.

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#### **Alison Macfarlane**

Similar problems have arisen with data from the Health and Social Care Information Centre. This arose when NHS England's mishandling of its proposed care.data system led to press reports of misuse of its data, mainly by private companies, some of whom had made

personally identifiable data available on the internet. It imposed a moratorium on the issue of data and demands that people who had previously applied for access to data should delete them (see Radstats 110 for a longer comment on the problems associated with care.data and how the government responded to these). In the health field, there is a great deal of systematic reviewing of published research. So as well as wanting to produce further articles after the end of funded projects, researchers have to be prepared to answer questions from reviewers about how they arrived at their results.

In both these examples, government has responded to its own incompetence by clamping down on researchers. Of course it should keep track of the data it has issued and regularly ask researchers if they are still using them. There is also an argument for departments securely archiving research projects once they are no longer active and this should include contextual material as well as the actual data. It is important to ensure that personal data about members of the public are kept confidential, but equally important to do so in a way that ensures that the public investment in data collection can be used as fully as possible for research for public benefit. New deletion policies achieve neither of these aims.

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