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By Adam Smith at the Data for Policy 2015 conference, Cambridge

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Cabinet Office wants academics' help to improve government data use

Cabinet Office insiders have said that academics can help the UK government develop better practices around its use of data, including developing a tool that enables civil servants to text mine consultation responses.

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Paul Maltby, director of open data and government innovation at the Cabinet Office, told a conference audience that his colleagues in Whitehall often needed to draw conclusions from 10,000 consultation responses, and would be greatly helped by text mining software that was tailored to policymakers' needs. If academics could find or develop an open-source text mining tool, this would be superior to "getting a team of people together for six months in a room" to read them all, he said.

"The [software packages] out there at the moment are geared towards brand managers and communications people," he said at the Data for Policy conference at the University of Cambridge on 15 June.

Academics should also include data ethics in a broader range of fields, Maltby said. He argued that while social scientists may be accustomed to thinking about the ethics of using personal data, the mathematicians who develop the underpinning code that is eventually used by the social scientists may not be as aware of the ethical issues. It would be useful if a broader range of researchers, including mathematicians, were trained in ethics, he said.

Maltby's team in the Cabinet Office monitors data-analysis tools and techniques in government and companies, and then tests the tools in order to spread the best practices through government.

His colleague Cat Drew, a senior policy adviser in data science at the Cabinet Office, was also speaking at the conference. She said that her team had developed a test to guide government use of data. The test says that a project using personal data can go ahead if the public benefit is deemed to be greater than a combination of the level of intrusion and the risk of unfair distress or harm.

Drew said she wanted academics to do more work on understanding the trade-offs that people make when they give their personal data to companies and government. "What do the public think is the balance between public benefit and the risk to themselves or personal intrusion or someone being unfairly treated?" she asked.

Maltby said that his team had met with some resistance in Whitehall, with some claiming that data analysis is not new, but that, through visualisations and segmentations, he has demonstrated that it does offer more possibilities than ever before.

Drew added that the idea of a combined ethical and legal framework was new to government. It has traditionally stuck to guidelines set out in legislation, she said, but there is an understanding that this is no longer enough. "Ethics and the law are not the same thing," she said, adding that technology is changing too fast for the law to keep up.

Finbarr Livesey, a lecturer in public policy at the University of Cambridge, had his own recommendation for how academics can help government on data projects. "I would be very interested to see if you could get an anthropologist to follow your team for a long time," he told Drew and Maltby. "There's not enough anthropology of data science in government."

On the same day, the European Union's council of ministers published its position on the EU Data Protection Regulation, which includes amendments that maintain exemptions for research. This is in comparison to the European Parliament's position, published in March, which reduced the scope for such exemptions. Academics are concerned that reforms to the regulation could have unintended negative consequences by restricting access to data for research.

More than 40 European academic and non-commercial organisations, including the Wellcome Trust and vice-chancellors' group Universities UK, welcomed the council's position, saying that it was a positive step forward, ahead of trilogue negotiations between the Parliament, council of ministers and the European Commission, which will start this month.

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