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Editorial: Information sharing—Easy to say ... much harder to do than we want to believe!

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Our PMM theme began when we set out on the journey of a research seminar series in 2014 with the subtitle:

'What needs to be shared and (not shared) when we share information?'

At that point, the immediate landscape seemed depressingly familiar in terms of the sorts of presenting problems we were asked to focus on in thinking through the issues of the sharing of information. These were the 'veterans' of the past 20 years (or more) of UK policy of integrating health and social care, children, young people and families and place-based initiatives (for example 'total place', devolution and so on) (Wilson, Martin, Walsh, & Richter, 2011; Cornford, Wilson, Baines, & Richardson, 2013; McLoughlin, Wilson, & Martin, 2013; Richardson & Asthana, 2013; Centre of Excellence for Information Sharing, 2018). We were a group of academics and practitioners who had been working on aspects of the data and information sharing challenge for over 15 years. We set out with a laudable, but perhaps ambitious, aim for our seminar series, which was to make information sharing success the norm rather than the exception, through new research, policy impact activity and knowledge exchange, nationally and internationally. A number of our informed hunches about information sharing as a domain were confirmed through the series of events that showed that the information sharing problem is truly heterogeneous and spread across a wide variety of academic disciplines, policies, practices, professional and temporal contexts (Dawes, 1996; Gil-Garcia, Chengalur-Smith, & Duchessi, 2007; Bellamy, Raab, Warren, & Heeney, 2007; Yang & Maxwell, 2011; Bharosa, Lee, & Janssen, 2012; Wilson & Gray, 2015).

One of our engagements included the launch of Centre of Excellence for Information Sharing at the Cabinet Office in London, where we were regaled with a story of information sharing in Napoleonic times and the route that the information of victory at

the Battle of Trafalgar took to reach the government in London (271 miles, 38 hours, 21 changes of horse—known as the 'Trafalgar Way': an early information supply chain tale). Other sessions included the use of local government and business information for research data, including the challenges faced by Big Data initiatives in acquiring data in the face of public sector austerity and commercial interests, and taking the UK Census by moving from a survey-based approach to the collection of information via intermediaries. We also heard from the Nesta-funded Office of Data Analytics initiative in devolution areas in England; and about the emerging ways in which fire and rescue services think and use data and information changing from a historical property-based focus to a wider lens of community safety. Finally, we discovered the international perspectives from the USA, Italy, New Zealand and Australia where the term has different meaning and a range of framings from disaster management, labour markets and personal privacy. We can observe much from this 'rich tapestry' but, for us, the striking thing was that diversity of context was often allied to homogeneity in nature of the joining-up problem.

The contributions in our PMM theme reflect this and naturally fall into two categories. First, the learning going on in the doing of information sharing where those working on, in and with complex applied areas report on their observations about the challenges of the messiness of information sharing. The second part is comprised of contributions taking a step back from the melee of the information sharing practice to examine the conceptual framings underlying the prevailing assumptions about the means and ends of data and information sharing.

Learning from doing information sharing: Insights from multi-agency contexts

Our first paper, by Ian McLoughlin, Yolande McNicoll, James Cornford and Sally Davenport, draws from work carried out in Australia and New Zealand

exploring the potential for government and public agencies to uncover effective linkage, sharing and use of data. The authors review the opportunities and issues involved, with a particular focus on the social (including human) services sector, where some of the most challenging problems facing government exist and some of the most far-reaching and transformational changes might be achieved.

Information sharing implies multi-agency working (whether inter- or intra-agency) and our paper by Sora Park, J. Ramon Gil-Garcia, Theresa A. Pardo, Megan Sutherland and Andrew Roepe presents an analysis of cross-sector information sharing making the point that a lot of empirical and academic research tends to focus on private or public sector organizations only. Using the US financial markets as a context, the authors examine regulated environments where information sharing occurs within hybrid collaborations of public, private and non-profit organizations leading to structural complexity and concomitant information asymmetries in incentive and governance structures.

We know from our own lives that health information is not only complex but often socially and personally sensitive in ways that do not universally apply in other domains. The explosion of digital technologies in healthcare has led to new and innovative approaches in data sharing, analysis, interpretation and yet another 'gold rush' in the promise of analytical technologies, such as personalized medicine and artificial intelligence. Our new development article by Tejal Shah, Louise Wilson, Nick Booth, Olly Butters, Joe McDonald, Kathryn Common, Mike Martin, Joel Minion,

Paul Burton and Madeleine Murtagh outlines the work going on in the Connected Health Cities programme in the north of England presenting early observations from an ongoing development of a regional infrastructure.

The idea of a 'data trust' is the creation of a new organizational actor with the explicit role of caring for data in the exchanges between organization and citizens. Our first debate article is from Jack Hardinges and Peter Wells, from the Open Data Institute (ODI), who introduce and describe the thinking behind an emerging innovation in this area of data trusts.

Challenging prevailing assumptions about the nature of data and information sharing

Our first paper in this section takes an overview of information and data across organizational boundaries and how the problem has been framed in three conflicting ways. Drawing on the concept of institutional logics of design, governance and enculturation, James Cornford proposes strategies for

addressing this conflict. The strategies are contingency, combination, conflict, ambiguity and synthesis. His conclusion then links the problem of information sharing to the paradoxical nature of information.

Our new development article by Stephen Curtis and John Edwards takes an overview of the role that information sharing plays in discussions about privacy. It contextualizes the barriers to information sharing and describes government attempts to overcome these from the perspective of the privacy debates that can sometimes dominate conversations about the relationship of citizens to information. The authors call for improvements in the debates, in particular greater proportionality in decision-making about sharing information and in the need for balance in debates between public expectations about privacy and service delivery.

Programmes of transparency in policy-making, citizen engagement, and the stimulation of civic innovation have recently had data as an integral part. Although this explicit recognition is a good thing, our third new development article, by David Jamieson, Rob Wilson and Mike Martin, challenges the benefits surrounding the production, consumption and publication of open government data, positioning it in the wider context of data more broadly. The proposal is that the static positions of 'open' or 'closed' data fail to reflect the realities of the applied use of data to real world conversations and relationships suggesting that thinking of data as 'permeable' and therefore open to interpretations could be a more helpful way forward.

Our final debate pieces cover the current situation from two complementary perspectives. Stephen Curtis explores the current LGA/MHLG 'digital transformation' programme and draws comparisons with previous e-government initiatives observing the lack of learning, in light of the similarities, in the framing of such programmes, as digital as the change, rather than the much more useful role for digital, as establishing the environment for change. Rob Wilson next examines the apparent dead end of 'information sharing' policy. Information sharing is currently at a low ebb in policy terms and the current fixation with data sharing approaches represents a reductionist solution to the problems we are facing. Although data has its place, ultimately addressing the issues around sharing information are the only way of making progress beyond the simple transactional part of the responsibilities of the state (for example administration of buildings and vehicle taxes) where a data sharing approach is sufficient. It is not one or the other—both data and information are required to deliver on the relational approaches needed (for example in contexts of community engagement or healthcare) to deliver meaningfully on the promises of public value.

Concluding observations

From our seminar series and this themed issue, we can confirm that the terms 'information sharing' and 'data sharing' are used in different ways, and are taken to mean both the same and different things, in all these contexts. Using the terms 'data' and 'information' sharing interchangeably leads to confusion and delay. To move forward we need to define these much more explicitly as this is at the root of the conceptual issues that continue to pervade debates in this area. Two things need to happen:

- We need to move on from the implicit model, in policy, based on the unit of an individual citizen interacting with single organizations in specific transactions with a monolithic state and/or its agents, to support the reality of the information provenance and brokerage required of the multi-agency collaboration of a networked society.
- The role of government investment and administration need to evolve therefore to regulate, govern and empower the public realm of data and information as infrastructure. This is crucial for the sorts of horizontal co-ordination required, at all levels, to meet the complexity of the real (rather than imagined) needs of individuals, communities, businesses (McLoughlin et al., 2013; Cornford et al., 2013; Janssen & Van Der Voort, 2016).

These are key challenges in the future of governance and, despite some of the gloom about the internet and digital more broadly, there are positive signs of an understanding that it is about the data and information not the technology. That this then makes it much harder than previously believed is a fact that has been now recognized by the polity. From our perspective, through the various processes of engagement over the past 15 years, we can say that there is increasingly a critical mass of scholars and practitioners with the hard-won experience, knowledge and commitment to improve on the mistakes that have been made. Only when we begin to realize the true nature of the problem can we begin to make sense of what to do.

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