# IIC Blog – Russell Seekins

How (and how not) to use data in a crisis

Focus on basics, beware of shiny new things

The Data Software giant, *Palantir* has released a blog[[1]](#footnote-1) reflecting on the learnings from the Covid-19 pandemic. Its opinions are worth hearing, not least because it specialises in public sector activities, and has large government clients around the world, including a number of health bodies.

While recognising the value of data-driven efforts to the pandemic response, the company sees as folly ‘the exalting of data or technology alone as a sufficient first-order focus’. Two responses in particular came in for heavy criticism. During the early stages of the pandemic, policymakers were seeking to understand the effectiveness of movement restrictions, such as lockdowns and curfews, in reducing community transmission. Cue the emergence of a ‘mobility data ecosystem’ in which, the company says, location information was often derived from sources with questionable transparency and privacy practices. There was insufficient attention paid to the bias in device and application adoption and the effect it would have on the accuracy of the data. Many data sources have since become the target of legislative scrutiny.

The second criticism is of ‘shiny new object’ technology. Here the company has in its sights exposure notification and contact tracing systems. Developers and technology communities, along with politicians and policymakers, invested a huge effort into the idea of ‘leveraging smartphones as proxies for individual exposure.’ Most systems were never deployed, or didn’t work when they did. Well-meaning as they were, the attempts were mostly just a ‘monumental distraction’.

What should policymakers learn from these and other failings? Palantir sets out a number of principles (which you can read *here).* ‘*Start with the data you have’* means avoiding the temptation to seek rapid access to vast amounts of data. The pandemic showed that the utility of many new data sources proved limited, while existing ones tended to be underutilised. The company also argues for a ‘*focus on decisions to be made’,* rather than attempting to gain insights. Understanding the availability of PPE to hospitals, for example, was a concrete question which translated to a necessary and proportionate data requirement and specific analyses.

Inevitably, the blog, written by Palantir’s Privacy and Civil Liberties Engineering Lead, aims some barbs at competitors on the ‘techno-optimist’ train and emphasises the value of focusing continuously on the basics, in order to provide the tools to create what the company calls a ‘common operating picture’. Nonetheless, many policymakers will find themselves nodding along with many of the ‘back to basics’ observations, such as the importance of an enforced privacy-protection strategy and the involvement of an established data governance body to oversee the development of data platforms. It’s captured in the mantra of ‘necessity, proportionality, transparency’.

The report cites the efforts to deploy AI in pursuit of a range of tasks, including patient diagnosis, hospital triage and transmission predictions as another example of a ‘shiny new thing’ which failed to deliver. The quote on the subject from Dr. Bilal Mateen of the Wellcome Trust could be a summary for much of the approach to data usage during the pandemic: ‘*Until we buy into the idea that we need to sort out the unsexy problems before the sexy ones, we’re doomed to repeat the same mistakes.’*

1. https://blog.palantir.com/reflections-and-lessons-from-the-covid-19-crisis [↑](#footnote-ref-1)