## 40 years Census Decision: The census and understanding privacy protection in the transition of time

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### Part I: 40 years Census Decision & Census Debate

# Census Decision 1983 – German Constitutional Court (BVerfG)

### • Background:

- Planned Nation-wide census, update of citizen registry
- Legal complaints to BverfG (Wild & Stadler-Euler / Steinmüller, Brunnstein & Podlech)
- Declared by BVerfG as non-constitutional in December 1983







# Main legal privacy principles declared by the German Constitutional Court (BVerfGE 65, 1):

- Right to informational self-determination derived from German Constitution (Art 1 | & 2 | GG)
- There are no "non-sensitive data"
- Principle of **Purpose Binding** emphasized
- Privacy not only important for protecting individuals but also for democracy
   & society as a whole
- Effective anonymisation ("faktische Anonymisierung") of census data demanded



Source: Michael Dick/ picture-alliance/ dpa

## **Census Debate 1987**

VOLKSZÄHLUNG

FR SPIEGEL Nr 3/19

### **Discussion:**

- Does the deletion of directly identifying personal data (name, address) render the census data effectively anonymous?
- -> Simple simulation model demonstrated: Majority (>= 90%) are still identifiable (BSc thesis - Fischer-Hübner 1986).
- Alternative: use of existing databases with (privacyenhancing) statistical inference controls? (MSc thesis -Fischer-Hübner 1987).

**Big boycott protests –** 

However, legal complaints to BverfG unsuccessful.

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## **Part II : Lessons Learned since then...**

## Importance of Census Decision & Census Debate – Lessons learned

### (1) No non-sensitive data & Importance of Privacy for Democrary

Private traits and attributes are predictable from digital records of human behavior

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Author Affiliations

Edited by Kenneth Wachter, University of California, Berkeley, CA, and approved February 12, 2013 (received for review October 29, 2012)

### Abstract

privacy.

We snow that easily accessible digital records of behavior, Facebook Likes, can be used to automatically and accurately predict a range of highly sensitive personal attributes including: sexual orientation, ethnicity, religious and political views, personality traits, intelligence, happiness, use of addictive substances, parental separation, age, and gender. The analysis presented is based on a dataset of over 58,000 volunteers who provided their Facebook Likes, detailed demographic profiles, and the results of several psychometric tests. The proposed model uses dimensionality reduction for preprocessing the Likes data which are then entered into logistic/linear regression to predict individual psychodemographic profiles from Likes. The model correctly discriminates between homosexual and heterosexual men in 88% of cases, African Americans and Caucasian Americans in 95% of cases, and between Democrat and Republican in 85% of cases. For the personality trait "Openness," prediction accuracy is close to the test-retest ac Kosinski, M., Stillwell, D., & Graepel, T. (2013). Private traits and attributes are examples of associations between attributes and Likes and dis predictable from digital records of human behavior. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 110(15), 5802-5805.



### Cambridge Analytica Data Breach with impact on US American Elections

## Importance of Census Decision & Census Debate – Lessons learned (II)

(1) Deletion of directly identifiable data  $\neq$  Anonymisation – Re-identification is easy

Latanya Sweeney – experiments on 1990 US census data -

# 87% of the US population can be uniquely identified by gender, ZIP code and full date of birth

(L. Sweeney, Uniqueness of Simple Demographics in the U.S. Population, LIDAPWP4. Carnegie Mellon University, Laboratory for International Data Privacy, Pittsburgh, PA, 2000).

# Failures of (simple) "anonymisation" by just deleting/replacing attributes



- released a dataset of search queries from ca. 650K users, 2006
- replaced user names with numbers

#### New York Times reporter exemplified easy reidentification:



"Thelma Arnold's identity was betrayed by AOL records of her Web searches, like ones for her dog, Dudley, who clearly has a problem."

Credit: Erik S. Lesser for The New York Times

## NETFLIX

- released 100M ratings from ca. 480k users, 2006
- claimed that all personal data was removed from the set

Re-identification by matching with public **IMDb** database:

- Netflix data: not two records are similar more than 50%.
- If the profile can be matched up to 50% similarity to a profile in IMDB, then the adversary can identity the profile with good likelihood.

(A. Narayanan and V. Shmatikov, "Robust de-anonymization of large sparse datasets (how to break anonymity of the netflix prize dataset)," in Proc. 29th IEEE Symposium on Security and Privacy, 2008. )



### How Unique Is Your Web Browser?

Peter Eckersley\*

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Abstract. We investigate the degree to which modern web browsers are subject to "device fingerprinting" via the version and configuration information that they will transmit to websites upon request. We implemented one possible fingerprinting algorithm, and collected these fingerprints from a large sample of browsers that visited our test side, panopticlick.eff.org. We observe that the distribution of our fingerprint contains at least 18.1 bits of entropy, meaning that if we pick a browser at random, at best we expect that only one in 286,777 other browsers will share its fingerprint. Among browsers that support Flash or Java, the situation is worse, with the average browser carrying at least 18.8 bits of identifying information. 94.2% of browsers with Flash or Java were unique in our sample.

By observing returning visitors, we estimate how rapidly browser fingerprints might change over time. In our sample, fingerprints changed quite rapidly, but even a simple heuristic was usually able to guess when a fingerprint was an "upgraded" version of a previously observed browser's fingerprint, with 99.1% of guesses correct and a false positive rate of only 0.86%.

Eckersley, P. (2010). How unique is your web browser?. In *Privacy Enhancing Technologies: 10th International Symposium, PETS 2010, Springer* 



### Art. 29 Data Protection Working Party – Opinion 05/2014 on Anonymisation Techniques

 Anonymisation - data must be processed in such a way that it can no longer be used to identify a natural person by using "all the means likely reasonably to be used" by either the controller or a third party....

### Part III: Effective PETs as Enablers -Solutions & Challenges

# K-Anonymity (Sweeney & Samarati)

K-anonymity: "Each value combination of the quasi-identifiers (demographic data) occurs at least k times"

(Enforced by generalisation/supression of attribute values).

Name	Birth date	Gender	ZIP	Civil Status	Duration	Diagnosis		Name	Birth date	Gender	ZIP	Civil Status	Duration	Diagnosis
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<u>e</u>	17.03.79	male	1276	married	7	В		(A)	1970's	male	1***	married	7	В
	01.07.80	female	1073	single	2	В		(A)	1980's	ghost	10**	single	2	В
	07.09.84	female	1077	single	0	С		(A)	1980's	ghost	10**	single	0	С
	02.07.89	male	1016	single	2	D		(A)	1980's	ghost	10**	single	2	D
<b>6</b>	21.09.91	female	1267	it's complicated	4	E		(i)	1990's	female	12**	it's complicated	4	E
<b></b>	24.12.98	female	1268	it's complicated	4	А			1990's	female	12**	it's complicated	4	А

## **2020 US Census & Differential Privacy**



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**Understanding Differential Privacy** 

Within Disclosure Avoidance Modernization

Blogs

#### Demonstration Data & Progress Metrics

Census confidentiality protections—what we call "disclosure avoidance"—have evolved over time to keep pace with emerging threats. Since the 1990 Census we've added "noise"—or variations from the actual count—to the collected data. For 2020 Census data we're applying noise using a newer protection framework based on "differential privacy." Learn more here about why and how we're modernizing our protections and how you can engage in the process.

For an overview, read this brief: Why the Census Bureau Chose Differential Privacy

f y in Facebook Twitter LinkedIn Harvard Data Science Review • Special Issue 2: Differential Privacy for the 2020 U.S. Census

### The 2020 Census Disclosure Avoidance System TopDown Algorithm

John Abowd<sup>1</sup> Robert Ashmead<sup>1</sup> Ryan Cumings-Menon<sup>1</sup> Simson Garfinkel<sup>2</sup> Micah Heineck<sup>3</sup> Christine Heiss<sup>3</sup> Robert Johns<sup>3</sup> Daniel Kifer<sup>1,4,5</sup> Philip Leclerc<sup>1</sup> Ashwin Machanavajjhala<sup>6,7</sup> Brett Moran<sup>1</sup> William Sexton<sup>2,7</sup> Matthew Spence<sup>1</sup> Pavel Zhuravlev<sup>1</sup>

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$$(e^{\mathcal{E}} \approx 1 + \mathcal{E} \text{ for small } \mathcal{E})$$

### **Differential privacy - models**



Local privacy

# **Challenge: Explaining Differential Privacy (DP)**



# **Conclusions & Discussion**

- Census debate & decision important milestone
- Lessons learned: "Anonymised" data can never be totally anonymous
- PETs can minimise risks but come with utility trade-off & usability challenges
- Census and/vs. statistics on existing databases (see Zensus 2011, 2022)