



## Big Data - seeing the wood for the trees

An interesting article on CNet ([http://reviews.cnet.com/8301-13746\\_7-57599417-48/big-data-to-make-driving-safer/](http://reviews.cnet.com/8301-13746_7-57599417-48/big-data-to-make-driving-safer/)) highlighted one of the most talked about topics in the analyst playground at the moment: Big Data. Nokia is now using location-based data tracking and mapping technologies to gather 21 billion data points per month from drivers. It is claimed that this data will enable Nokia to see how the average driver handles the road, with the intention that, in future, your car will be able to issue warnings about dangerous curves, weather warnings and other road hazards.

With tens of millions of people across the globe now 'connected' through billions of sensors and trillions of transactions carried out on a daily basis, it is easier than ever to record an unimaginably scary amount of data. From Set Top Boxes and Electronic Point of Sale to Social media, data is being collected on everybody, on all aspects of life. But is it possible that the sheer mass of data to process and handle will actually hold analysts, and thus businesses, back rather than strengthen their analysis and provide new and useful insights? Can we really trust all of this data to tell us when we should slow down and when it is safe to go faster on our roads?

The proposed benefits of Big Data are pretty straight forward. Being incredibly detailed it provides low cost, highly granular measurements of behaviour. The data does not rely on surveys but on actual behaviour so is likely to be less biased and, due to the sheer volume of information collected, it allows a narrower segmentation of customers leading to more precise targeting of products and services.

However, despite many within the industry hailing the rise of Big Data as a revolution of sorts, some remain sceptical as to how easy this data is to handle and how much easier it will make the work of analysts in the future. More granular data is not always better as it is easy to miss the wood for the trees and Big Data is not necessarily good data - it is essential precision is not confused with accuracy. Most Big Data measures devices, not people, and there is a huge amount of white noise encumbering the data. If this data is not properly aggregated, there is the danger of it being misleading. Bryan Trogon, entrepreneur and Semantic Web evangelist, said "Big Data is the new oil. The companies, governments and organisations that are able to mine this resource will have an enormous advantage over those that don't." However, if Big Data is seen as oil it still needs refining. One of the most time consuming jobs as an analyst is cleaning up data, spotting and solving inconsistencies and anomalies and chasing missing data. The bigger the data, the more of these errors there will be.

It has been argued that Big Data is not actually "big" at all, but just a very large volume of data points updated at high-frequency, with short lag to the actual event. It is individual transaction data, and thus is highly granular. Big data is, in reality, lots and lots of very small data. James Walker, a senior partner based at the Prophet's in London, describes Big Data as being like a sandstorm of data, as opposed to a landslide. And like real sandstorms, this data sandstorm can blind and disorientate you.

The whole point of the analysis we do is to create a model of reality on which we can provide insight and advice. While it is tempting for analysts is to spend time processing this Big Data, they risk ending up with an answer that could just as easily have been achieved a lot sooner through simpler methods. Mediacom's very own Neil Charles uses a fantastic analogy of going on holiday to highlight the common misconception that just by gathering all of this data, amazing things will happen (<http://www.wallpaperingfog.co.uk/2012/09/planning-big-data-holiday.html>). In reality, it is much faster, and more useful, if you plan what you need and want to know, and then gather only the data you need to answer those questions.

As for my car telling me when I should slow down? As futuristic as that sounds, after having daily arguments with an eco-friendly hire car last week which insisted on telling me which gear was best, I think I'll pass on that for now.

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