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Big data: What's the big deal?

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It can be hard to understand exactly what "big data" is, because the term, by definition, refers to very complex data sets so vast in scope that traditional data systems (e.g., data warehouses and databases) fail to support them.

In reality, big data is exactly what it sounds like: a whole lot of data—more than you can likely imagine—and it's growing exponentially.

Today, each and every internet user creates increasingly large amounts of data—reportedly combining into a massive 2.5 quintillion bytes of data every day. To put such an unthinkable number into perspective, this includes more than 204 million emails per minute, 65 billion WhatsApp messages per day, and 1.2 trillion Google searches per year.

Every day, internet-connected cars produce 4 terabytes of data (one terabyte = 1,000,000,000,000 bytes), and online wearables generate 28 petabytes (that's 28,000,000,000,000,000 bytes). Indeed, it's estimated that the digital universe will reach 44 zettabytes in total by 2020—one zettabyte is one sextillion bytes.[1] Suffice it to say, we're talking *very* big data here. Colossal, in fact.

While we may be in the business of considering data privacy from a compliance perspective, it helps contextualize the matter to consider our own use of data-driven technology. It's likely you own a smartphone or use GPS, for example. Perhaps you track your fitness levels with a wearable or log sleep patterns or other healthcare on an app. Maybe you browse social media or make use of mobile banking, contactless payments, or online food delivery. Many of us use video streaming platforms, order taxis online, or share photos and anecdotes with friends and family using a messaging service. The list seems endless, but all of these have one thing in common: the accumulation of data.

The truth is, the more data digital service providers have on us, the better or more "intelligent" their product or service generally is. Each time apps are updated, or new devices are released, the new version includes some sort of increased functionality. Perhaps it's more intuitive or easier to navigate, or maybe it just seems to know what you like, making helpful and relevant suggestions efficiently.

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