Independent Advisors on AI and data driven technology publish recommendations to Government on social media targeting.

IRIS 2020-3:1/13

Julian Wilkins
Wordley Partnership

The Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation (CDEI) has produced its final report recommending what regulatory steps the UK Government should take to prevent harm from online targeting yet allow ethical innovation in this area. The CDEI is an independent expert committee led by a board of specialists established and tasked by the UK Government to investigate and advise on how to maximise the benefits of data-driven technologies as well as address any potential negative aspects. Data-driven online targeting is a new and powerful application of technology whereby its systems predict which content would be most likely to interest people and influence them to behave in a particular way.

The focus of the CDEI's report and recommendations is on online targeting directed at personalised advertising and content recommendations systems. Furthermore, the report considers the role of online targeting in three areas: autonomy and vulnerability, democracy and society, and discriminations.

The CDEI set themselves three sets of questions. The first concerned the extent to which technology is out of line with public values: what is the right balance of responsibility between individuals, companies and the government?

The second question set asked: are current regulatory mechanisms able to deliver their intended outcomes? How well do they align with public expectations? Is the use of online targeting consistent with principles applied through legislation and regulation offline?

The third set of questions addressed solutions. What technical, legal or other mechanisms could help ensure that the use of online targeting is consistent with the law and public values?

The report's enquiry revealed that the public wanted online targeting but for such systems to operate to higher standards of accountability and transparency, and people wanted to have meaningful control over how they are targeted. Both the industry and the public recognised that the current self-regulation status quo was unsustainable and that proportionate regulation was required to ensure accountability, transparency and user empowerment.

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026

The report identified that the use of online targeting systems failed to meet the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) human-centred principles on Artificial Intelligence (AI) which set standards for the ethical use of technology.

As a consequence, the CDEI recommends principle-led regulation, whereby the regulator anticipates and responds to changes in technology and seeks to guide its positive development to ensure it is in alignment with people's interests.

An online harms regulator working closely with other regulators, such as the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO), would increase accountability through codes of practice requiring organisations to adopt standards of risk management, transparency and the protection of vulnerable people.The regulator should have a statutory duty to promote privacy and freedom of expression.

Additionally, the regulator should have powers to collate information to see if online platforms are complying with the prescribed codes of practice.This would include empowering independent experts to assess a platform's data to test for compliance with the implemented code of conduct.

The regulator must exercise these powers proportionately and be subject to due process, as well as coordinate with other regulators such as the ICO and the Competition and Markets Authority to ensure consistency and avoid duplication.

Online targeting systems could have a negative effect, for instance Internet addiction that, in certain instances, leads to radicalisation and the polarisation of political views.

The CDEI recommends that the regulator facilitate independent academic research into issues of significant public interest and assist such work, which would require online platforms to provide secure access to their data.

Furthermore, platforms should maintain online advertising archives to provide transparency with respect to personalised advertising that posed a particular societal risk, for instance, political claims that needed to be challenged to ensure that elections are fair. This would complement the government's plans for labels on online electoral adverts so as to make paid-for content easier to identify and give users some basic information to show that the content was targeted at them. Whilst in other arenas, it would ensure that data was used fairly and not in a discriminatory way, such as in the domain of recruitment.

The CDEI recommends that new markets be created to support the public's wish for more meaningful control, such as third-party safety apps and third-party intermediaries. Clear ethical standards would help encourage public sector bodies to use online targeting in an effective way.

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026

The report flagged that ”Societies are in the early years of developing policy and regulatory responses to data-driven technologies like online targeting [...] By focusing on building the evidence base for informed policymaking and creating the right incentives, the UK will be able to govern online targeting in a way that is both trustworthy and allows responsible, sustainable innovation to thrive.”

Review on online targeting: Final report and recommendations

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/864167/CDEJ7836-Review-of-Online-Targeting-05022020.pdf

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026