Balancing Open Science and Data Privacy in the Water Sciences

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This is a draft manuscript intended for scientific peer review and feedback, currently in review at Water Resources Research.

Key Points

- Hydrologists have little guidance to deal with privacy concerns for open science which are inherent in socio-environmental research.
- Hydrology data with potential privacy concerns includes high-resolution spatial data, consumer data, and digital trace data.
- Scientists should continue to share data openly while proactively addressing privacy concerns via ethical data management and sharing.

Abstract

Open science practices such as publishing data and code are transforming water science by enabling synthesis and enhancing reproducibility. However, as research increasingly bridges the physical and social science domains (e.g., socio-hydrology), there is the potential for well-meaning researchers to unintentionally violate the privacy and security of individuals or communities by sharing sensitive information. Here, we identify the contexts in which privacy violations are most likely to occur, such as working with high-resolution spatial data (e.g., from remote sensing), consumer data (e.g., from smart meters), and/or digital trace data (e.g., from social media). We also suggest practices for identifying and addressing privacy concerns at the individual, institutional, and disciplinary levels. We strongly advocate that the water science community continue moving toward open science and socio-environmental research and that progress toward these goals be rooted in open and ethical data management.

Emerging and intersecting trends

Widespread adoption of open science practices such as sharing data via public repositories advances water science by enabling new types of synthesis-based science and ensuring reproducibility (Gil et al., 2016; Munafò et al., 2017; Powers & Hampton, 2018). In the earth sciences, this push is led by the American Geophysical Union's policy to make data and code available for all papers under the Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable (FAIR) standards (Stall et al., 2017; Wilkinson et al., 2016). However, growing adoption of open science practices is converging with two other trends: (i) acknowledgment that human activities influence the water cycle, which is contributing to a broader movement of socio-environmental research including socio-hydrology (Konar et al., 2019; Sivapalan et al., 2012; Srinivasan et al., 2017; Wagener et al., 2010); and (ii) exponential growth in computing power and sensor technology allowing data collection and analyses with unprecedented spatial and temporal granularity (e.g., high-resolution data). These advances are essential for understanding the water cycle of the Anthropocene, and we unequivocally encourage continued progress along these paths within the water science community.

At the intersection of open science, socio-environmental research, and high-resolution data, however, there is an emerging potential to violate the privacy of uninformed and/or non-consenting individuals and communities. Researchers have a responsibility to acknowledge and anticipate the power inherent in open data and accordingly minimize harm to stakeholders potentially impacted by their research. While the natural inclination of many well-meaning researchers (the present authors included) is to focus on the societal benefits of data sharing, there are also potential risks arising from unintended applications of open data, particularly related to communities that a researcher is not a part of and therefore lack cultural sensitivity around. In some cases, people or companies in positions of power have taken advantage of open data at the expense of those whom data sharing was intended to benefit (Donovan, 2012; Gurstein, 2011; McClean, 2011). For instance, the digitization of land records in Karnataka, India, was promoted as a tool to democratize access to information, but instead allowed wealthy landowners with more financial resources to consolidate power and capitalize on this new data source (Donovan, 2012). As seen through the lens of environmental justice, these concerns are particularly acute when working with historically disadvantaged groups such as impoverished communities and indigenous peoples (Christen, 2015; Radin, 2017).

Though data-sharing mandates make exemptions for potentially sensitive datasets, resources are lacking to help hydrologists navigate ethical, privacy, and security issues which may lie outside of their training or experience. Our primary objective here is to highlight potential privacy concerns specific to hydrology at the intersection of open science, socio-environmental research, and high-resolution data; and secondarily to recommend practices for water science researchers interested in adopting open science principles.

Potentially problematic data

Concerns related to sharing data may arise anytime that the data, whether on its own or combined with other datasets, can be linked to specific, non-consenting individuals or communities. Researchers should be cautious when their research meets the definition of "human subject research", defined in the USA as including "a living individual about whom a research investigator... obtains data through 1) intervention or interaction with the individual, or 2) identifiable private information" (32 C.F.R. 219.102(f)). However, the definition of "human subject research" focuses on the individual subjects of research, and there may also be situations where concerns arise about datasets dealing with communities, households, or other units. This may include third parties who are not the specific human subjects - for example, family members of study participants (Resnik & Sharp, 2006) - or broader communities even when individual data are protected (Radin, 2017).

We highlight three general categories of data used by the water science community where privacy concerns are most likely to arise: high-resolution spatial data, consumer data, and digital trace data (Figure 1). We argue that harm to individuals or communities will infrequently come directly from the researchers publishing studies on the data themselves but rather from third parties who could use the data for profit, coercion, or regulatory action (Lagos & Polonetsky, 2013); analogously, poachers have used species location data from scientific papers for wildlife trafficking (Lindenmayer & Scheele, 2017).

High-Resolution Spatial Data

High-resolution spatial data includes satellite data (and derived products), outputs of hydrological models, and other geospatial datasets. Geospatial data are commonly used in the hydrologic sciences, and unmanned aerial vehicles (*i.e.,* drones; Kelleher et al., 2018), traffic and surveillance cameras (Leitão et al., 2018), and increasing access to satellite data are likely to make these data less costly to collect and more widely available in the near future. Despite not meeting traditional definitions of human subject research, this type of data could be problematic at the individual and community levels.

At the individual level, high-resolution spatial data can be used to track or identify private activities. For example, a farmer's operations, finances, and land valuation may be inferred by mapping agricultural practices such as cropping patterns, management, health, and productivity (Deines et al., 2017, 2019; Kang et al., 2016; Seifert et al., 2018; Zipper et al., 2015). Similar datasets containing information on illegal or quasi-legal activities such as marijuana cultivation could be used by law enforcement agencies (Bauer et al., 2015; Butsic et al., 2017, 2018). At the community level, high-resolution hydrological data such as that produced by flood risk studies, for example following hurricanes (Bin & Landry, 2013) or wildfire (Mueller et al., 2009), can lower property values. Similarly, sharing household level water quality data may have negative impacts on property values or be correlated with health concerns at both the individual property and neighborhood levels; this has been a concern in Flint, Michigan following the water crisis. In some cases, private information might also be used by the insurance industry. Also potentially concerning are culturally or ecologically sensitive geospatial information, which can lead to resource degradation and harm from ecotourism (Lindenmayer & Scheele, 2017; Lunghi et al., 2019; McCoy, 2017; Vaz, 2008).

Given that many remotely sensed datasets are characteristics of the land surface which could be observed by someone on the ground (e.g., land cover, irrigation practices), it is challenging to draw the line between properties of the landscape and private information. The notion of 'reasonable expectation of privacy' for people, a legal standard in the US (the 4th Amendment) and EU (European Court of Human Rights, Article 8), can come into conflict with the preponderance of high-resolution spatial data, and satellite and aerial image datasets may be privacy and liability risks to individuals (Craig, 2007). Some court cases have ruled on issues with potential conceptual application. For example the United States of America v. Vargas (2014) decision ruled that an individual had an expectation to privacy in and around the front yard of their home and thus surveillance in this area was a violation of their rights. With similar kinds of data collection in a research context, there is no clear cut answer or deciding body, but legal rights and protections might still apply and the ethical implications remain.

Consumer Data

Potentially concerning consumer data includes consumption of water or electricity, or other variables that are of sufficient spatial or temporal resolution to be identified with and provide information about an individual or household (McKenna et al., 2012). While these data often have a spatial component to them, they are distinct from the previous category in that they quantify resource consumption (Helveston, 2015). The potential to monetize consumer information raises issues of data ownership, along with privacy.

Consumer data gaining traction in the water sciences are derived from "smart meters," which are electricity or water meters that can transmit data back to the utility at hourly or finer temporal resolutions. Smart water meters are relatively less common than smart electricity meters (Cominola et al., 2015), but are potentially valuable for understanding water use, promoting conservation, and managing water supply in urban areas (Britton et al., 2013; Cardell-Oliver et al., 2016). However, the data provided by smart meters can also reveal household-level activity, namely when residents are home and using energy or water (Cole & Stewart, 2013; Molina-Markham et al., 2010; Sankar et al., 2013).

While water-related research is often fairly unintrusive, consumer water data can enable undesired surveillance. Meter data may be used in law enforcement (Douris, 2017) and searched by the police without a warrant (*Naperville Smart Meter Awareness v. City of Naperville*, 2018), as for identifying illegal marijuana grow operations (US7402993B2, 2008). Some cities publicize the highest water users during droughts in an effort to "name and shame" consumers into conserving water resources (Glionna, 2015; Horwath, 2015), which, regardless of perceived efficacy, violates personal privacy and allowable choice, and may not actually be necessary if less individualized tools for shaping consumption behavior (such as pricing and information campaigns) are in place.

Digital Trace Data

Digital trace data includes deliberate online activities (e.g., social media, web browsing) as well as web-enabled technologies (e.g., the 'Internet of Things') (Howison et al., 2011), and can be divided into two groups: passively and actively contributed. Passively contributed data describes data posted to the internet without the intent or knowledge for potential scientific use (most social media data), while actively contributed data describes data that were contributed to a specific project (most crowd-sourced citizen science research). Both types of data have been used for hydrologic research. Examples of passively contributed studies include generating long-term water level records from YouTube videos (Michelsen et al., 2016), estimating snowpack from public web images (Giuliani et al., 2016), and reconstructing crop planting dates from Twitter postings (Zipper, 2018). Examples of actively contributed studies include citizen science projects focused on streamflow monitoring (Fienen & Lowry, 2012; Lowry & Fienen, 2013), storm identification (Zhou & Xu, 2017), and flood extent mapping (Le Coz et al., 2016; Yu et al., 2016).

Both actively and passively collected data can violate individual or community privacy (Wu, 2013). Data derived from social media present particular challenges. The State of New York recently allowed insurance companies to use social media data to help determine customers' premiums (Scism, 2019). While research is permitted within Twitter's terms of service, the lack of comfort and awareness among users highlights both the public's growing unease with researchers using digital trace data, and the fact that individuals often accept user agreements that they do not fully understand (Bashir et al., 2015; Editorial Board, 2019). Although social media data are increasingly used in environmental research (Daume, 2016; Zipper, 2018), only 17% of respondents in a recent survey indicated that they were comfortable with their tweets being used without being informed (Fiesler & Proferes, 2018).

The ethical responsibility of researchers may thus call for a higher standard than either the letter of law or terms of service in order to protect individual privacy rights, autonomy, and well-being (Ghermandi & Sinclair, 2019). The good intentions of researchers cannot prevail over the interests of human subjects; even a sense of social purpose should not be used to rationalize circumventing ethical requirements and procedures. Give the pace of technological change, and lagging governmental regulation, self-regulation by the scientific community is needed.

Addressing privacy concerns with open and ethical data management

Despite challenges, we do not suggest that data should never be openly shared. Rather, our goal is to encourage water scientists to practice *open and ethical data management* in which researchers are aware of and proactively address privacy and security considerations prior to sharing data (Meyer, 2018). Guidance can be drawn from other disciplines including medical science, utilities research, computer science, economics, psychology, and of course, law. Given the diversity of data used across these fields, accepted practices will vary widely (Lupia & Elman, 2014), and we focus on broadly applicable general principles which may be relevant to the water science community. A recent synthesis proposed a decision tree for biodiversity data which considers the potential benefits and risks of sharing (Tulloch et al., 2018); we present a similar approach in Figure S1. However, legal constraints vary (Klass & Wilson, 2016), as only 58% of countries currently have data privacy legislation (United Nations, 2018), and researchers should consider their local context.

Institutional and Community Resources

First and foremost, we encourage water scientists to consult available institutional resources. Prior to beginning a study, investigators should evaluate whether it could be classified as human subjects research (Figure S1), which is more common in studies related to water governance, management, and policy than in hydrology. Institutional review boards in the United States, research ethics committees in the European Union, and their equivalents in industry and other nations set requirements for obtaining informed consent from research subjects and stipulations for protecting data confidentiality and privacy (Resnik, 2018). Additional resources found at many institutions include legal counsels, privacy or information officers, research librarians, and research ethicists. Indigenous groups often have additional protections related to data gathering and sharing so these resources should always be consulted for research touching on or including tribes. Researchers and their institutions may need to enter into agreements to ensure protection of data provided by others, such as meter data collected by utilities. As data privacy and security issues evolve, so will public opinion and regulatory policies about which researchers need to be aware.

There is also a need to think beyond the individual when sharing data that may lead to harm for a group of individuals or a community. Dickert & Sugarman (2005) suggest a community consultation process which is well-suited to the water sciences (Figure S1): (1) prior to beginning a project, researchers should identify potential risks to individuals and the community; (2) the community being studied should benefit in some way; (3) potentially affected parties should be given opportunity to shape the project; and (4) communities share in the responsibility for the project. Since it can be prohibitive to obtain consent from each member of larger communities, this process can be conducted via consultation with elected representatives, community leaders, and open public meetings (e.g., town halls) as well as focus groups and opinion surveys.

To meet the diverse needs of the water research community, legal frameworks should be augmented, guided, or clarified by community, professional, and scientific standards. Many funding agencies require the submission of data management plans, and grant reviewers and program managers should require these plans to address potential privacy and security concerns. Additionally, community data repositories such as CUAHSI HydroShare can develop data privacy guidelines; even the simple step of requiring users to affirm that submitted data are legally allowed and do not contain personally identifiable information can be effective (King, 2007). To further assist early-career scientists, responsible human subjects training should be integrated into graduate programs in the water sciences and departmental handbooks and protocols should include information about institutional resources to improve both the technical and ethical data literacy. As in other areas of ethical training, opportunities or requirements for continuing education should also be provided.

Sharing Private Data

Ethical data sharing requires transforming data via aggregation or other means to ensure that it is no longer identifiable at a level that jeopardizes privacy, and cannot by 'de-anonymized' when combined with other datasets (Helveston, 2015; Wu, 2013). All anonymization techniques will inherently cause a loss in the information content and utility of the data (Antonatos et al., 2018). To minimize the effect of this loss, it is critical to also include detailed information about the anonymization procedure via metadata and sharing code, ideally using open-source tools integrating version control for transparency, and leave personal data jurisdiction to the agencies responsible for collecting and warehousing these data (Bakker, 2019; Lowndes et al., 2017; Stagge et al., 2019).

Spatially identifiable information can be stripped from data prior to publication without compromising reproducibility if the spatial location of the consumer data is not critical to the study. McKenna et al. (2012) suggest, for example, that smart meter data can be used without compromising individual privacy by aggregating data to sufficiently coarse spatial or temporal scales so that individual activities cannot be inferred. Alternately, where the spatial relation of data points is important but their absolute geographic coordinates are not, geographic coordinates can be scaled to preserve relative relationships between points (Stack Whitney et al., 2016) or data can be converted to a non-spatial network with mapped relationships between nodes (individuals) and elements (data points) (Figure 1). A network perspective can yield insights about characteristics of water systems without revealing information about individual users (Barabási & Albert, 1999; Perelman & Ostfeld, 2011). Where spatial location is critical, aggregation is necessary; water use data are often aggregated to the census block or coarser for research purposes (Brelsford & Abbott, 2017; Breyer et al., 2012, 2018), which protects individuals but limits the ability of researchers to explore fine-scale spatial dynamics in urban water use and conservation.

Digital trace data is particularly challenging to anonymize, since social media platforms such as Twitter are searchable; even if a researcher strips identifying information (such as user names) from the database, data can easily be 'de-anonymized' via searching for the text or observing network structure (Ayers et al., 2018). In most studies, data at the individual level are unnecessary, since researchers are primarily interested in population-level statistics, and derived statistics can be extracted from the dataset and shared without the accompanying raw data. Even more directly, the metric quantified from each piece of digital trace data could be shared. For example, a study using tweets to study the timing of irrigation could share the date, county, and crop-type mentioned without sharing the specific field-level geolocation or raw tweet text.

Conclusions

Increased adoption of open science principles and availability of high-resolution data are transforming socio-environmental and socio-hydrological science for the better. At the convergence of these trends are emerging challenges related to ensuring reproducibility without inadvertently causing harm to individuals or communities. As new data sources and interdisciplinary research continues to grow, self-reflection as a community is necessary to ensure that privacy and security are dealt with proactively to maintain trust in the hydrologic sciences among all stakeholders and the public we serve.

Acknowledgments

This paper arose from a workshop at the Santa Fe Institute that was supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 1735884. No data were used in this manuscript but if any were, we definitely would have openly published them!

Figures

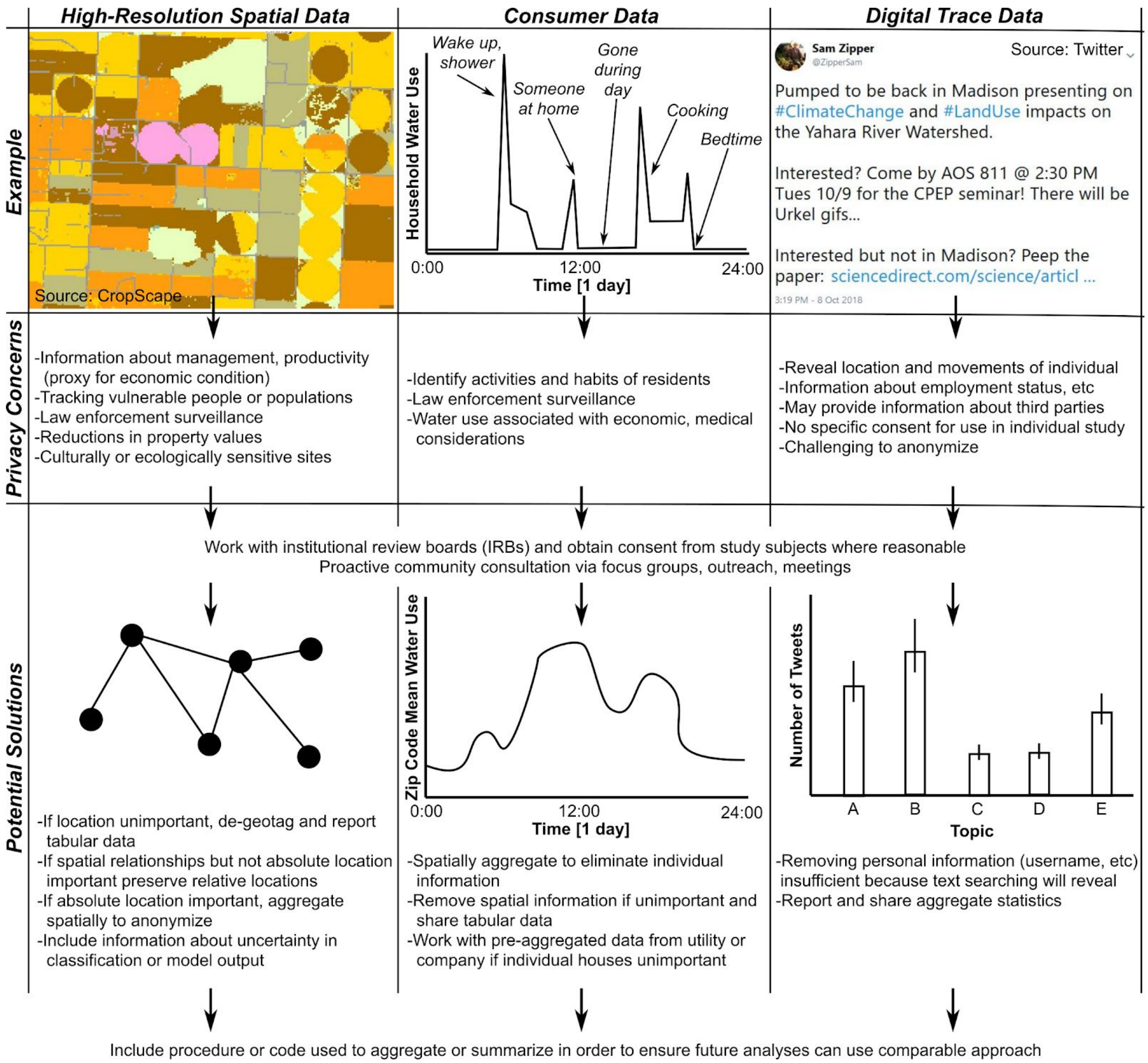

Figure 1. Examples of data types with potential privacy concerns, and recommended practices. Left: High spatial resolution data as provided by the US Department of Agriculture's CropScape portal for the Cropland Data Layers (Han et al., 2012), which uses satellite data to map agricultural land use and crop types at 30 square meter resolution. Center: Example high temporal resolution household water use data from a smart meter with annotated information that can be inferred. Right: Example tweet including potentially concerning information (in this case, travel patterns).

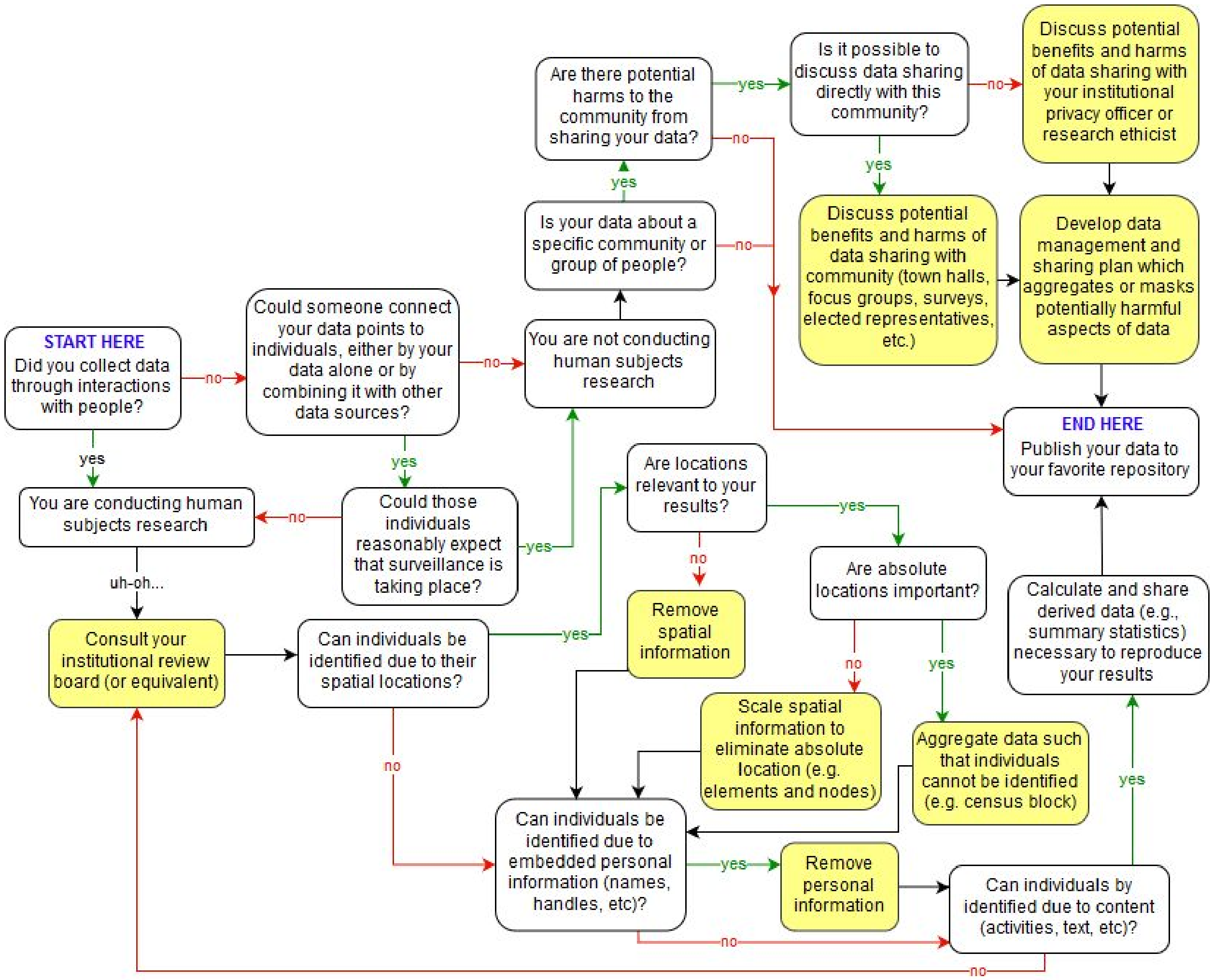

Figure S1. Potential decision tree researchers can use to evaluate practices for sharing their data. Yellow boxes indicate actions researchers should take to protect privacy.

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