

At a glance

PROJECT: Sense4us

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PROJECT COORDINATOR: University of Southampton IT Innovation

PARTNERS:

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RESEARCH BRIEF

WHAT IS THE CHALLENGE WE NEED TO ADDRESS?

The challenge we directly address relates to formulating policy in an ever-changing environment and ensuring that all relevant issues and influences are taken into account. How does one test the policy for societal impacts, before it is implemented? There exists a vast ocean of information today that is in essence open, but sifting through it, making sense of it, and weaving a coherent thread of relationships and relevance, feels like an impossible task.

WHAT ARE THE INEFFICIENCIES/GAPS THAT WE WANT TO COVER?

When policies are made by governments, it is often under extreme time pressure. Two major challenges face researchers in policy making:

- ☁ Researchers need to be confident they have gathered enough relevant information - they don't want to miss important factors when researching a policy subject.
- ☁ Sometimes unexpected and undesirable impacts of a policy are discovered after the policy is enacted into law, which is too late. It would be much better to discover these impacts before the policy was enacted.

Researchers may be tasked with researching a policy subject that they are not experts in, so they need a quick way of seeing the key factors and citizen groups that affect, or are affected by, a policy option. At the moment researchers can use techniques like Google searches or Wikipedia for information, but they don't know whether they have covered all aspects of the subject area. They face the classic problem of "unknown unknowns" - they simply do not know what information is missing.

WHAT IS THE SOLUTION WE OFFER?

Sense4us takes a different approach from using web searches and clicking links on web pages. By automatically discovering information around the policy subject area and presenting it as a map of related information, SENSE4Us gives a quick overview of the information that may be relevant and how it is connected together. The SENSE4US user can start with just one key word or phrase representing their policy topic and find information related to it. This could include other subject areas, citizen groups, organisations, locations, things etc. Relationships between the items of information can also be discovered.

RESEARCH BRIEF

SENSE4US tools display information as keywords, phrases, web pages, or links to other Internet resources, such as repositories of open data. Each item of information can be used as another search term and further information around this can also be found automatically. The discovery process is controlled by the user, as s(he) decides which items of information are worth further investigation, and can go back and forth to investigate any piece of information the tool discovers at any time.

Information can come from many sources. An example is social media - SENSE4US shows the researcher what else people are saying when they are talking about the policy topic. Another source of information can come from the mapping of web pages and the links between them. SENSE4US can make a map of relevant pages in Wikipedia and how they are linked so the user can quickly see an overview of pertinent information, and can investigate these pages further if they wish so. Both sources may suggest new topics that the researcher has not previously thought of.

The user can investigate the impact of different policy options on factors discovered by the tools by using computer simulation inside the toolkit. By using links that describe "cause and effect", a map can be determined showing the influence or impact different factors have in and around the policy subject.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS FOR POLICY MAKERS AND RESEARCHERS?

Most tools can find the usual or "obvious" information, but a significant benefit from using SENSE4US is that the user can discover "surprising" information - information that they would not have expected. The surprising information may be relevant or irrelevant, but it is all worth investigating in case it uncovers important factors that were not previously considered.



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