



PhD Studentship

Topic: **Regulating Platform Infrastructures from the Global South**

Faculty of Laws
University College London

- **3 year**, includes **fees** and **tax-free £18,000 stipend**, open to **Home and Overseas** applicants.
- Part of the **Real Time Epidemiology project** (funded by the Fondation Botnar)
- Beginning **September 2021**

Supervisor

Dr Michael Veale, Lecturer in Digital Rights and Regulation, UCL Laws

Context

UCL Faculty of Laws is offering a fully funded 3-year Home/Overseas PhD studentship in Law, focussing on regulating platform infrastructures in the Global South. This is part of the 'Real Time Epidemiology' project (UCL investigator Dr Michael Veale, partners EPFL, ETH Zürich, TU Delft, 3db Technologies) funded by the Fondation Botnar.

The COVID-19 pandemic has spurred interest in using sensors, both on existing devices like smartphones, as well as bespoke devices, to support granular, rapid, public health interventions. The Real Time Epidemiology Project has experience of this, having created two protocols ('DP-3T' Bluetooth tracing and 'CrowdNotifier' QR-code-based COVID exposure risk alerts), versions of which have been widely deployed around the world during the pandemic. Sensor networks are also changing, with new technologies emerging that are more precise (such as Ultra Wide Band, used by Apple's 'AirTags') or longer in range (such as LoRa/Amazon 'Sidewalk'). At the same time, some desire to make use of data, including from such sensors, for various notions of public benefit, for example through 'data trusts', 'data foundations' or 'data altruism'.

The societal, technical and legal considerations concerning who gets to use, alter, assemble and dismantle such *platform sensing infrastructures* are complex. Private companies, such as Apple and Google, control hardware, operating systems and software distribution networks (app stores), through a range of technical and legal means. Their vertical integration can mean that software struggles to make use of sensors in the vast majority of devices they manage without their blessing. Private standard-setting bodies, such as the IETF or the IEEE, have had important roles in shaping this area. Some jurisdictions have tried, or are currently experimenting with, approaches to governing infrastructures (e.g. the EU's Digital Markets Act). Governments also desire to use these networks in very different ways: some have strong wariness about turning citizens into sensors, others see it as a way to surveil or even optimise their populations. Some have seen private governance of this area, particularly by US technology firms, as limiting abuses of power by governments. Others have seen the practical inability of states to control infrastructures built and maintained by these firms as impinging on varying notions of 'digital sovereignty'. Either way, all these above activities of regulation and governance have potential extraterritorial and transnational implications, creating a challenging landscape for a coherent and balanced global regime.

Policy discussions however centre predominantly on a few countries in the Global North. This is problematic, as attempts to rebalance legitimate decision-making power around the use and management of such infrastructures can hardly be said to do so if that rebalancing is solely within rich countries.

Consequently, UCL Laws invites applicants to work on a funded PhD in this area to, through rigorous research, create frameworks and insights to inform emerging policy debates. This project will be part of the Real Time Epidemiology team,

and will contribute and collaborate on work and discussions there, but the project will be steered independently by the PhD candidate, who will be free to shape it under the supervision of Dr Veale within the broad area of the topic questions below (including with regards to geographies or jurisdictions considered).

Research Topic(s)

The research will be expected to address one or more of the following questions, and through doing so, dialogue and contribute to the broader project.

- Which legal mechanisms are available to governments to intervene in platform sensing infrastructures?
- What are the limits of these mechanisms? How do the limits differ between countries, and why? What are the perceptions and experiences of governance actors in the Global South as to differences in these capabilities?
- What are the current trends in or proposals for the regulation of platform sensing infrastructures, and how might these affect the locus of decision-making around the world?
- What might more globally balanced governance of platform sensing infrastructures look like? Through which legal mechanisms might it come about? Does it have analogies in existing international governance mechanisms? What barriers might it face? How might different approaches affect human rights on-the-ground?

While a considerable amount of the research is anticipated to be desk-based, funding is available through the project for travel and fieldwork, for example to undertake interviews.

Further Information and Requirements

You must have a strong first degree (2:1 or first-class honours), which may be in law or a related discipline. It is strongly desirable to have a recognised Master's degree in Law or a technology policy-related area and we would normally expect a distinction overall, with evidence of first-class ability (or equivalent) in extended written work/dissertation. We are also interested in applicants who may have developed expertise in and around this field through professional experience.

To apply for the vacancy please email (in one email) by **18 June 2021** the following documents to phd-law@ucl.ac.uk with the subject line **"RTE PhD Application: <Your Name>"**:

1. A cover letter (1-2 pages) briefly introducing yourself and explaining your reasons for applying for this particular PhD studentship.
2. Full CV containing your email address and telephone number.
3. Copies of degrees and transcripts.
4. English language proficiency demonstration or relevant exemption as per usual UCL PhD entry requirements: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/laws/study/mphilphd/applying#Entry%20Requirements>
5. A sample of your written work. Preference is given to shorter pieces of 1,500-3,000 words but a dissertation of up to 10,000 words can be submitted. This sample is expected to demonstrate independent critical analysis, the construction of a persuasive argument, intelligent engagement with legal sources, and attention to detail.
6. A proposal in relation to the PhD topic that is informative and persuasive. You need to clearly describe the scope of the topic, its particular objectives, and engage with its methodology. This should be done as concisely as possible. Your proposal should be 1,500–3,000 words and include a preliminary bibliography (not counted in the word limit). Guidance on how to write a good proposal can be found here: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/prospective-students/graduate/sites/prospective-students_graduate/files/potential-supervisor.pdf

Two references should also be sent by your referees (by the same deadline) directly to phd-law@ucl.ac.uk, indicating in the subject of the email the name of the applicant they are submitting the reference for.

UCL aims to acknowledge, understand, and tackle structural inequities and unjust social power imbalances that affect our communities across the institution. We very strongly encourage applicants from backgrounds that are underrepresented in academia, and aim to create a research environment that tackles relative, typically unspoken and unacknowledged privilege.

If you have any queries regarding the vacancy, please contact Dr Michael Veale: m.veale@ucl.ac.uk

If you have any queries regarding the application process, please contact: phd-law@ucl.ac.uk

Closing date: 18 June 2021 // (Remote) Interview date: 28 June 2021

Begins September 2021.