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Judicial analytics and Australian courts: A call for national ethical guidelines

Pamela Stewart and Anita Stuhmcke
Faculty of Law, University of Technology Sydney, Australia

Abstract
Judicial analytics is the use of data to monitor, understand and predict judicial behaviour. This is a global phenomenon and a cause for both celebration and concern. Given the unique role of courts and the potential for judicial analytics to undermine the rule of law, there is a need to review and revise the current inertia in the Australian regulatory approach to this issue. This article calls for the development of professional ethical guidelines for law and other disciplines, to assist and guide the creation and dissemination of predictive judicial analytics.

Keywords
Courts, rule of law, regulation, open justice, judiciary, judges, data

There is a global divergence in regulatory approach to the use of ‘judicial analytics’. The term ‘judicial analytics’ describes the analysis of data (including judgments and other public records of the work of judges) using artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning to monitor, understand or predict judicial behaviour. In 2019, in a global first, France criminalised the publication of judicial analytics with penalties of up to five years in prison. The new Article 33 of the French Justice Reform Act reads: ‘No personally identifiable data concerning judges or court clerks may be subject to any reuse with the purpose or result of evaluating, analyzing or predicting their actual or supposed professional practices’.

In contrast, the Australian approach to the use of data analytics to measure judicial performance and even to predict judicial behaviour (predictive analytics) is one of regulatory silence. This silence is noteworthy given the emerging use of judicial analytics in Australia by courts, academics, media and other commentators across public fora.

This article outlines this use of judicial analytics in Australia before discussing the benefit and disadvantage of such use. Importantly, our focus is not upon the responsible use of data to measure past judicial efficiency or the use of metadata in civil proceedings or analysis of types and volumes of cases heard as presented in Courts’ Annual Reports. Instead, we are most concerned with the use of data to predict judicial behaviour and case outcomes. In conclusion, we advocate the development of professional ethical guidelines, for law


Corresponding author:
Anita Stuhmcke, Faculty of Law, University of Technology Sydney, PO Box 123, Broadway NSW 2007, Australia.
Email: Anita.Stuhmcke@uts.edu.au
and other disciplines, to assist and guide the creation and dissemination of predictive judicial analytics.

Use of judicial analytics by courts, academics, commercial publishers and commentators: Australia and the US

The use of quantitative methods to 'predict' judicial behaviour is well established in legal research, especially in the United States (US). In 1922, Haines, a political scientist, published an article in the *Illinois Law Review* reviewing 15,000 decisions about public intoxication and linking outcomes to the personal traits of the New York magistrates. In the 1940s, Pritchett, again a political scientist, published a book charting dissent in the US Supreme Court. From these humble beginnings, the research-scapes concerning judicial behaviour in the US is today dominated by three principal commercial providers of legal analytics services: LexisNexis (owning Lex Machina and Ravel Law), Bloomberg Litigation Analytics and Premonition Analytics. All facilitate research about the behaviour of judges assigned to cases. They claim to provide analysis of individual judges' past rulings in specific types of cases, comparisons between judges and the arguments that particular judges find persuasive. American companies such as Gavelitics use AI across very large databases to ascertain whether judges will make 'favourable' rulings based upon data about 'past rulings, judicial workload, and biographical information'.

In 2017, a generalised model was claimed to predict the behaviour of the US Supreme Court with up to 71.9 per cent accuracy. The Australian development of judicial analytics and in particular predictive analytics lags behind other jurisdictions, especially the US. There is nevertheless a wide and growing spectrum of studies of Australian courts which use data to draw conclusions about court and individual judicial performance. Australian scholarship also discusses the use of legal data analytics in diverse areas including: the use of big data in policing, automation across administrative law decision making, data collection and privacy, outcomes in defamation cases and criminal sentencing. Judicial analytics is currently only inhibited in Australia by the manner in which legal records are made available by the courts. They are not conducive to efficient data collation and analysis or to AI machine learning. However, the capacity to undertake judicial analytics scholarship is growing. Commercial legal publishers such as LexisNexis now provide legal analytics platforms. International publishers such as Premonition have already produced a report on both judges' and lawyers' success rates in Australia based upon scraping publicly available records. Toby Unwin, the Premonition CIO and co-founder, observed that '[o]ur data has proven that a client's choice of firm or barrister has a 30.7% impact on whether they win their cases.' Learning from the US experience, an escalation of Australian predictive judicial analytics, is now certain to follow.

The use of data to measure past judicial performance: A cause for celebration and concern

Data analytics is already the subject of ongoing criticism in terms of its application to the past performance of the
judiciary. Here, there are fundamental attitudinal differences between Australia and the US. As Robinson observes:

The American preoccupation with explaining judicial decision making with statistics has long been antithetical to Westminster scholars. . . . The notion that decisions can be explained in quantitative terms by an empirical analysis of the statistical patterning of judicial votes is foreign to Westminster sensibilities. 16

Robinson’s assertion is borne out by Australian public debate about the use of data to measure judicial performance. In October 2018, Aaron Patrick wrote a series of articles in the Australian Financial Review (AFR) criticising the speed of the Federal Court. 17 In one article, he revealed that 39 out of 69 judges had taken more than a year to write a judgment. 18 The judges were named although Patrick conceded, ‘[m] any of the details of 11,000 cases “scraped” from the internet are one-day procedural hearings’. 19 Patrick also reported that a ‘court spokesman’ (sic) had challenged the validity of the data analysis, saying it was “fundamentally flawed” and that ‘[t]he AFR’s approach is a simplistic and limited numerical analysis that fails to provide any meaningful insight into the quantitative and qualitative breadth and nature of the work of the court as an institution’. 20

This debate between the Federal Court and the AFR illustrates both the usefulness of data for judicial accountability and performance measurement as well as the fundamental problem of data analysis.

A central tenet of this debate is data utility versus data accuracy. In terms of utility, public confidence in the administration of justice is integral to the rule of law. The public has an interest in the efficient and fair operation of state institutions. The use of predictive analytics can help litigants decide whether to bring cases, decide strategies and tactics. Moreover, data analysis of judicial performance ‘disrupts’ the legal profession, shining light onto performance and success. In this sense, the use of judicial analytics is a cause for celebration even though it has been criticised as a blunt instrument for judicial performance management. On the other hand, concern about the inaccuracy of data analysis is aptly captured by judicial officers themselves. For example, former Chief Justice Gleeon observed in 2004:

Because the High Court deals with a relatively small number of cases, major statistical variations can result from random causes. I have pointed out to the other Justices that we could make large productivity gains by arranging that special leave applications or appeals that are now listed and heard together be listed and counted separately. 21

This observation highlights the danger in simply counting judgments, the point being that the science of counting can itself be influenced by changing what is counted.

**Predictive analytics and litigation outcomes: Promoting the rule of law**

Measuring past judicial performance and court efficiency is just one aspect of legal analytics. Formal predictive analysis of litigation outcomes enabled by AI using large legal databases goes much further. It seeks to enable lawyers to predict how cases will be decided by particular courts or judges.

It might be argued that this is simply a more reliable evidence-based way of doing what has always been done. Within a legal community, there will always be a kind of informal predictive analysis of litigation outcomes, especially in areas of legal practice where there is a specialist bar operating. There, the members of the profession know by virtue of their experience, the litigation tactics and arguments that will be most persuasive and they know the idiosyncrasies of individual judges and their views about particular legal doctrines. They know the broad approaches of individual judges to development of the law. Judicial analytics has the advantage of formalising knowledge that was previously anecdotal. Moreover, data analytics is undoubtedly a growing part of the future of the legal profession: data literacy is now seen as an essential skill for new lawyers. 22

Judicial analytics can also be viewed as important for upholding and applying the rule of law. The rule of law is part of the Australian Constitution 23 and requires that all members of a society are equally subject to publicly available legal codes and processes. 24 The transparency that data analysis offers across judicial decision making

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17 See especially, Aaron Patrick, ‘Federal Court Speed of Justice can be a Lottery’, Australian Financial Review (Sydney, 26 October 2018) 32; Aaron Patrick, ‘Public Servants Need to Face Scrutiny, but Who Judges the Judges?’, Australian Financial Review (Sydney, 26 October 2018) 32.
19 Aaron Patrick, ‘Public Servants Need to Face Scrutiny, but Who Judges the Judges?’, Australian Financial Review (Sydney, 26 October 2018) 32.
23 South Australia v Totani (2010) 242 CLR 1 (French CJ) [42].
arguably promotes the rule of law, ensuring judges are subject to open and transparent processes of accountability for their decision making. The benefit of data analytics is that it will serve the two ‘publics’ of the judiciary: society in general and the individuals who interact with courts, from litigants to lawyers. It will benefit the former by enhancing public confidence in the judicial process and the latter by clarifying and making available for scrutiny an important component of the Court’s work.

But there are some fundamental problems with predictive analytics. Not only is the use of data to measure judicial performance and predict litigation outcomes never as nuanced as the conclusions drawn from the collective experience of a specialist bar, such use of legal information may also undermine the rule of law.

Predictive analytics: Undermining the rule of law

Any technology that has the capacity to influence the work of the courts and the corpus of the law must be approached with caution. There is a distinction between using data analytics to improve the system of administration of justice and the use of predictive analytics that may shape and influence the outcomes of cases and even the development of the law itself.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of prediction models applied to the fundamental functions of the judicial system, is that core rule of law values may be endangered. Predictive analysis uses data and patterns that ignore legal precedent and the specifics of individual cases. Analytics codes legal information into separate machine readable parts which can then be analysed, reducing the normative framework of the justice system and law into patterns and numbers. With respect to judicial and predictive analytics, the data is created from the legal process itself, from the corpus of the law, and it is this which generates new knowledge. The organic development of law through precedent is transformed into algorithms rather than being recognised as a judicially refined body of legal regulation developed on a case-by-case basis.

In this sense, analytics is more than a reporter or analyser of legal information. Predictive analytics uses the law as a form of legal information to engage with and shape the law and the legal system itself. This use of data, or legal information as data, has the potential to determine litigation and courtroom tactics, the legal arguments advanced by counsel and may influence lawyers’ approaches to legal doctrine. The prediction of judicial outcomes will influence final litigation results, as litigants withdraw or settle claims on the basis of predictions. Ultimately over time, these subtle influences can shape legal principle.

This shaping is inevitable as data is now relied upon to assert truths. Presented as ‘science’, AI-generated predictive analysis takes on the attributes and biases of the society in which it operates in two main ways. Firstly, predictive data is only as good as its input and outcomes will reflect the bias or limitations of a human coder or those inherent in the judgments and documents from which data is extracted. Secondly, predictive judicial analytics will likely become a tool used by the most seasoned and advantaged litigants who have access to sophisticated data analytics systems. Access to justice inequalities in the Australian system is well known and predictive analytics may become yet another factor advantaging the most capable litigants over others.

Further, the intangibles of the legal system are not yet measured by analytics meaning that the ‘truth’ of the data itself is open to question. Courts are unique. Courts are accountable through the rule of law and the principle of open justice, and the need to avoid ‘counting’ the judiciary has been elegantly and forcefully made by the judiciary themselves. As Chief Justice Bathurst of NSW states, the judiciary is already accountable as: ‘Judges have ‘explanatory’ accountability in their obligation to provide open, public justice and reasons explaining their decisions, ‘content’ accountability in terms of the appellate process and ‘probity’ accountability in terms of their use of public resources.

While this observation was made in the context of retrospective analysis of judicial decision making, the observation becomes more forceful when applied to predictive analytics. Predictive analytics reduces the law to numbers rather than focusing on the intangible concepts of justice. As His Honour further observes, ‘in judging the judges, the qualitative factors inherent in the administration of justice, including the quality of judgments and fairness of process, are taken into account’. Fairness is neither quantifiable nor predictable meaning that the use of predictive analysis in law should be approached with caution and care.

28 Ibid 21 [64].
Of course, these concerns do not mean that all statistical analyses of patterns in judicial decision making should be rejected. The debate between the AFR and the Federal Court discussed above demonstrates that such analysis can bring to public consciousness patterns of behaviour and efficiency. However, debate about court performance is delicate and it should at least acknowledge that it is the system that is subject to discussion rather than the performance of individual judges. Judicial conduct is circumscribed by budgets, society and the law. While judges will properly resist being influenced by predictive analysis, given the requirements of judicial independence and the basic tenets of our legal system, data can be used to evaluate on a narrow range of efficiency of process and outcomes.

The need for ethical guidelines

The French legislative response to judicial analytics is at the extreme end of the regulatory spectrum. Given that data analytics is a useful tool and in terms of the open justice principle, upholds the rule of law,26 we do not advocate prohibition of judicial predictive analytics or any other legislative response. Indeed, given the data scraping of publicly available documents by international companies such as Premonition, to advocate this position would be futile. Rather, we suggest the development of ethical guidelines, promulgated by the courts, to set standards for the creation, development and use of judicial predictive analytics by academics, publishers, legal commentators and government. We advocate the creation of guidelines to heighten awareness of the use of data analytics and the responsibility that accompanies it in law as much as in any other discipline or area of social interaction.

Ethical guidelines should replicate the format of ethical guidelines common in areas such as the regulation of health and medical services. Similar to the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research,30 the use of ethical guidelines for judicial and predictive analytics should be seen in the broader context of the overall governance of this area of research. Ethical guidelines will not only provide a framework for all researchers, legal or not, but also will guide the responsibility for the ethical acceptability of any research undertaken for private companies and public institutions. While a disadvantage of ethical guidelines is a lack of formal sanction, the advantage is that they set a code of behaviour and a recognition of ethical obligations and standards. Ethical conduct is more than maintaining a minimum standard. It involves conducting research with respect for the law and concern for fundamental principles such as the rule of law.

A minimum aim of the ethical guidelines is to ensure that judicial predictive analytics does not provide predictive or opinion-based inferences that have ‘low verifiability’ and that any inferences provided are ‘justified’ by the data controller to establish their reasonableness. This means that guidelines should prescribe the use of extraneous personal information about judges (eg, schools/university attended; political and social associations; interests). We consider this type of research to be part of ‘fairness research’ in data science which has three basic concepts: lack of bias, non-discrimination and transparency.31

This is an approach recommended by Wachter and Mittelstadt in relation to big data analytics generally.32 Wachter and Mittelstadt state that this justification process would require disclosure of why the data used is a normatively acceptable basis for inferences to be drawn; why inferences drawn are relevant to the purpose for which they are to be used and ‘whether the data and methods used to draw the inferences are accurate and statistically reliable.33 Such an ethical obligation on the providers of judicial and predictive analytics will discourage the provision of highly unreliable material or at the very least set standards to allow for specific disclosure of the limitations of analysis provided.

Conclusion

The open court principle, which supports the rule of law, is not an end in itself. Openness ‘may yield where the

33Ibid 90.
paramount object that it serves – preserving the integrity of the administration of justice – so requires. While this statement is a reflection upon the open court rule, the notion of limits which it entails is prescient. We suggest that minimum expectations should be set for the ethical use of judicial analytics in Australia. Serious consideration must be given to whether the profession and the discipline of law should develop principles to meet sophisticated technological advances – to be proactive and not reactive.

**ORCID iD**
Anita Stuhmcke [https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3679-7301](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3679-7301)

**Pam Stewart** is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Law at UTS.

**Anita Stuhmcke** is a Professor of Law and a member of the UTS Law Health Justice Research Centre.

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