Data Privacy

[Click to schedule a meeting with the DITI Team]

When working with digital tools, it's important that we place them within their broader contexts. Given the NULab's commitment to equity, the majority of our tools are open source and free to use. This allows students and professors alike to engage with the digital humanities without having to bear the burden of cost, and it also opens up tools to those who might not have access to institutional resources. However, it is essential to remember that in signing up for a free tool you are often providing access to your data. This handout will cover some important questions around **data privacy.**

What is data privacy?

At its simplest, data privacy is a person's ability to control what of their personal information is shared and with whom. This can be understood as:

- Knowledge of what information is shared with the application/program/service in question.
- Knowledge of what third parties this data is shared with or exposed to.
- Understanding the right to recall or delete data retained by the application/program/service in question.

How is this data accessed?

Social media, websites, and other online applications collect their users' data, ostensibly in order to provide effective services. Many organizations, including government agencies and technology companies, leverage data to gain insights into users behavior, optimize products and services, and generate revenue.

But is it always clear how or why our data is being collected?

There are two main issues that users often run into when it comes to violations of their data privacy.

Developed by: Kasya O'Connor Grant
Questions? Contact us! nulab.info@gmail.com

The first is that users are often unaware of the extent of data collection that is occurring. This means that users are allowing these platforms and applications to collect more personal information than they were aware of.

The second is an unawareness of how data is being shared and with whom. This is often due to the inaccessible nature of a company/program/service's data privacy information —through the use of confusing language, burying the information within terms and conditions, or making it inaccessible to users of differing abilities.

In some cases, these platforms and applications have weak safety mechanisms around their data storage and it results in hacking which then leads to data breaches, where users' personal information is leaked. A famous example of this occurred in the 2010s, when the consulting company Cambridge Analytica collected the personal information of millions of Facebook users without their knowledge (you can learn more by reading this *New York Times* article).

What is dangerous about this?

There are a myriad of ways that the collection of a user's personal data can harm the individual. Three, in particular, come up frequently and have especially significant impacts:

- The first, and the one that has received the most attention recently, occurs when platforms and applications sell users' data to outside parties, leading to users receiving unwanted advertising often without their knowledge or consent.
- The second most often occurs when there is a data breach. Such breaches may be done by hackers with criminal intentions—such as identity theft, financial theft, or even harassment.
- The third occurs through data surveillance: when a government, company, or organization uses personal data to perpetuate oppressive or authoritarian practices.

How can data privacy be protected?

The first and most important way to protect your personal information is for you to ensure you are aware of when and how your data is being used on a given platform or application. This often means reading through the fine print that you scroll through before clicking "accept." Sometimes, however, the applications of your data might be couched in language that is purposefully hard to understand. If that's the case, you can always do further research around the data protection policies of that company.

Developed by: Kasya O'Connor Grant
Questions? Contact us! nulab.info@gmail.com

Is there a resource for this further research?

Yes! There are a myriad of resources available for understanding the ways in which your data is being collected and used by a given platform or application. An easy to use and clear website is Common Sense Privacy Program, which allows you to search for a specific entity, see its privacy rating, and read through an explanation for why it received this rating.