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Reflection on User Tracking

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## Metrics Collected

### Which Metrics

I used Google Analytics to do my user-tracking. The metrics I selected to track were:

* Traffic sources (where new users come from)
* Traffic rate (of previous 30 minutes)
* Session duration (time user spends on the website)

### Reasoning for Choosing Metrics

I chose to track traffic sources, as I was intrigued as to how users would visit the website. While hosted online, it is not advertised, or linked via any other website, therefore it is interesting to see where traffic originates from, also potentially allowing me to strengthen the source to gain more visitors.

Traffic rate was chosen simply because it lets me know how much the website is being used, a general metric that is useful to know for understanding how much my site is used.

Lastly, I was curious to see the session duration of users, to see if they enter the website, then read a bit and leave, *or* if the website is engrossing enough to keep users to read through all the content.

## Insights Gained

From a small test run with a peer, I could see that the time spent on the website was around 4 minutes. This roughly matches with the amount of time it takes to read the content and explore the graphs on my website, so this allowed me to understand that the user was ‘captured’ and taking the time to read the whole website.

## Benefits and Harms of User Tracking

### Benefits

User tracking provides many benefits for the owner of a website, it allows them to understand their user activity, how they interact with the site and what their site’s weaknesses are, which allows them to incorporate this in to further iterations of the website to increase the retention of users, and effectivity of the website’s content.

### Harms

On the other hand, this is somewhat detrimental to the user. It is invasive to users and captures metrics that reveal a person’s personal online activity. From using the Google Analytics tool, it is even clearer how invasive these metrics can be. You are able to track a user’s gender, age, location and even interests. This is an extension of the data Google and many other data-based companies using cookies to gain as much info about users as possible, to subsequently use it for purposes like advertising, and in this case to give companies and online vendors as much information about their users/customers as possible, with detriment to the user’s privacy.

## Implications

### Collecting Data

In Computational Social Science, we learn and understand the sensitivity of data, and the importance of handling it correctly. In a research proposal I had previously written for this course, *“The effect of varying online activity on users’ attitudes towards tracking cookies in the EU”*, I cover the large extent to which user tracking and cookies have an adverse effect on users individually and internet users as a whole, at benefit for those doing the tracking and owning users’ data. Due to this, from my position I understand that user-tracking is something that must be kept within limits. Metrics such as traffic sources and traffic rate are acceptable. They do not invade the user’s privacy much, and they provide constructive data to the website owner, although collecting data such as gender, age, location, *is* invasive, and leads to a greater detriment to the user than benefit to the owner.

### Using a Third-Party Tool

By using a third-party tool, the third-party therefore has access and control to the data collected. This is detrimental to both website users, and the website owners. Users are unknowingly sharing their data with a large corporation, and owners do not actually own their collection systems, own the data, or even have the ability to retract ownership of this data from the third-party.