What do people do online? Using data donation to understand digital behavior.

a workshop at the SPP Junior Researcher Meeting

Frieder Rodewald
University of Mannheim & Institute for Employment Research

Sebastian Prechsl
Institute for Employment Research & LMU Munich

October 22, 2025

2️⃣ What is data donation?

The participant’s perspective.

Changes in legal contexts ⚖️

- EU secures right to own data in Art. 15 of the General Data Protection Regulation
  - "The data subject shall have [...] access to the personal data" (§ Art. 15, 1)
  - "The controller shall provide a copy of the personal data" (§ Art. 15, 3)
- According to § Art. 20, users must receive their data "in a structured, commonly used and machine-readable format" (§ Art. 20, 1)

👉 **Solution:** Platforms offer data download packages (DDPs), which users can request and download to inspect data.

👉 **Consequence**: Researchers uses DDPs as part of user-centric data donation studies.

🤔 Please raise your hand 🖐

(Before a week ago...) Who has ever tried to request their data from an online platform?

What are data donation studies?

💡 **Definition:** *Data donation studies are a user-centric method for collecting digital traces.*

- Users have the right to request, access, and download data that platforms collect about them.
- They can make their *data download packages (DDPs)* available to science, often in the context of web surveys.
- Researchers use CSS methods to filter, anonymize, and aggregate this data locally on participants' devices.
- Participants can inspect/delete their data before any data is transferred.

Which types of data do DDPs contain?

For platforms like YouTube, Instagram, or LinkedIn, for example...

(Hase et al. 2024)

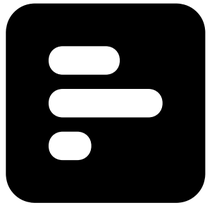
- User profiles (e.g., privacy settings)
- Activities (e.g., friends, likes, searches, exposure, analog movements)
- Content and context (e.g., ads watched, algorithmically inferred interests)

How is data from DDPs different?

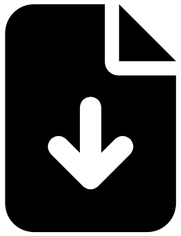
Compared to **APIs** (Ohme et al. 2024)...

- Control & informed consent of users
- Longitudinal data without "rate limits"
- Partly additional measurements (e.g., exposure data; non-public data)

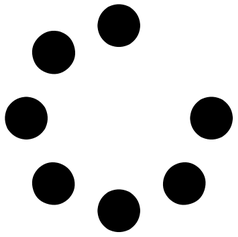
👉 but can be burdensome for participants!



Survey



Request & Download Data

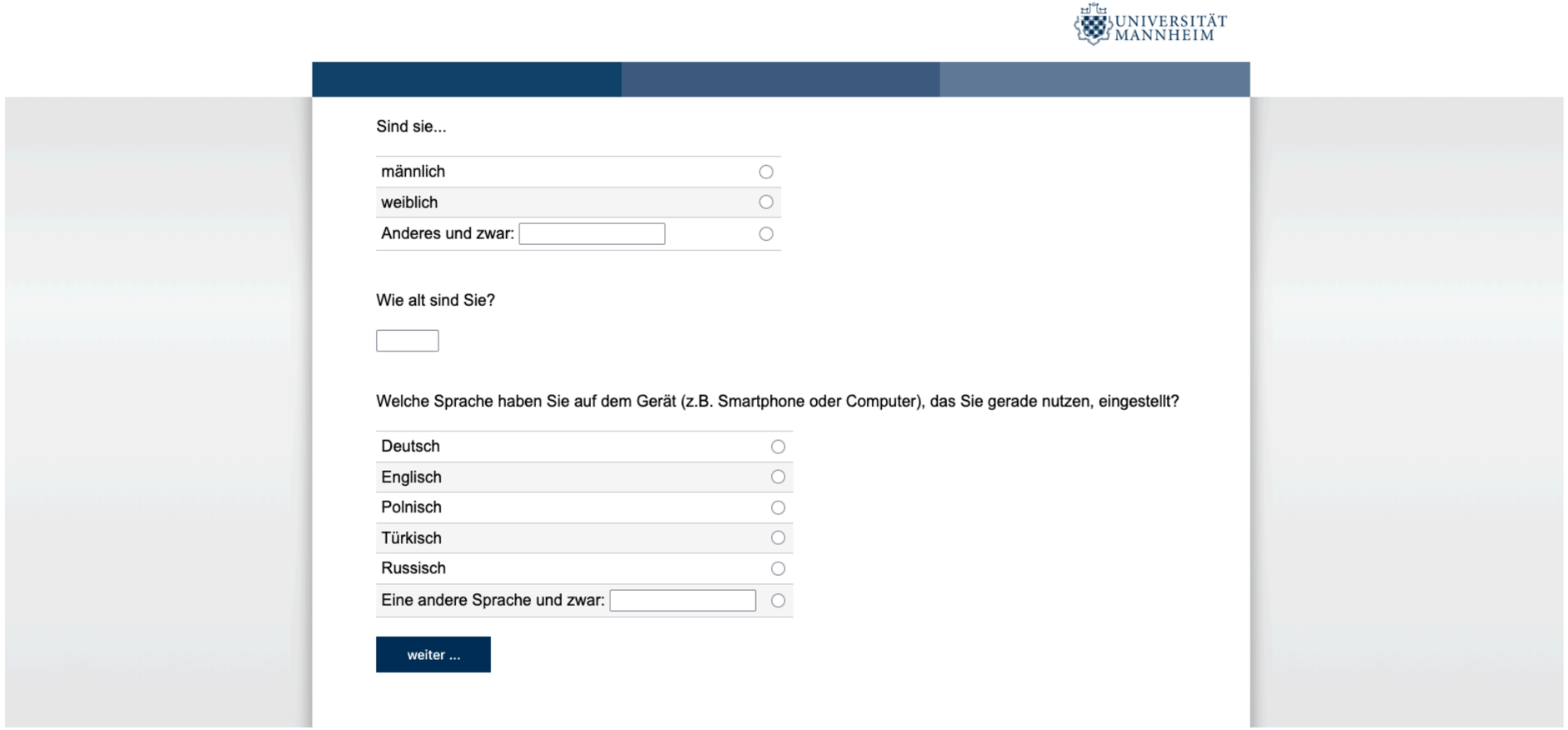


Extract Data

Inspect Data

Consent

Survey

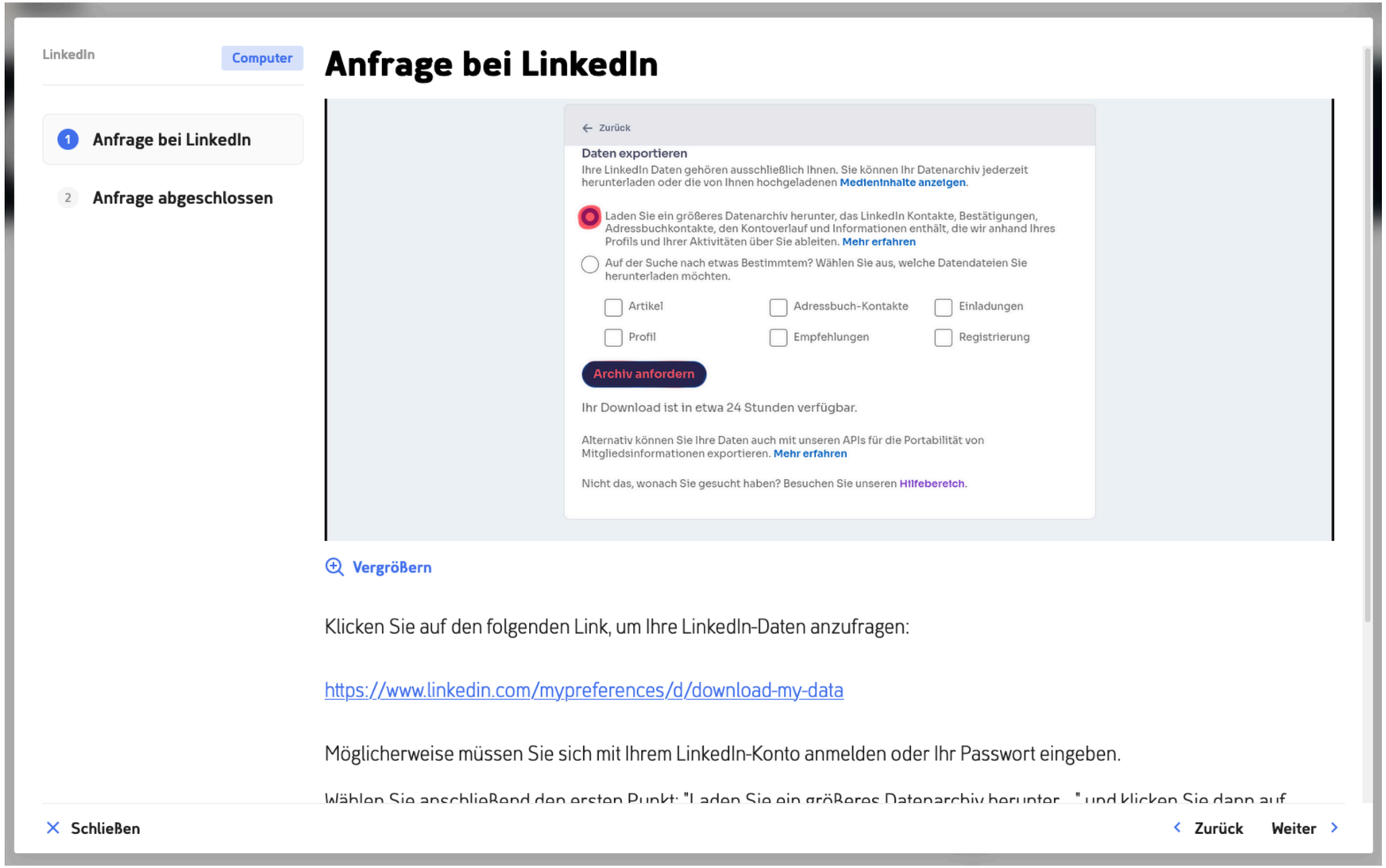


Survey start page

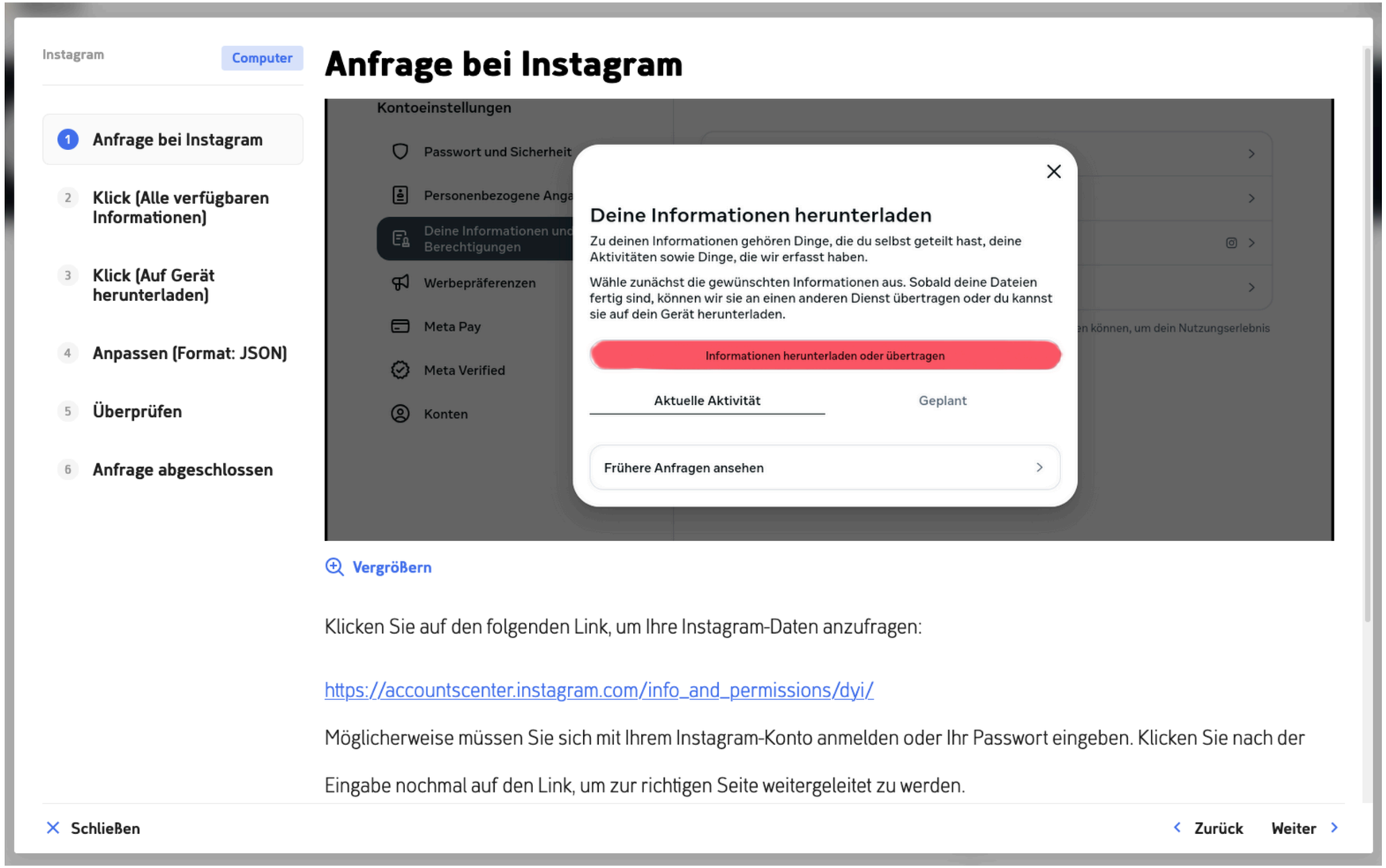
Request & Download Data

Different degrees in standardization for data requests (Hase et al. 2024)...

- Verification procedure (password requirements)
- Specification of data (metrics, observation period)
- Notification on provision of DDP
- Duration of DDP availability



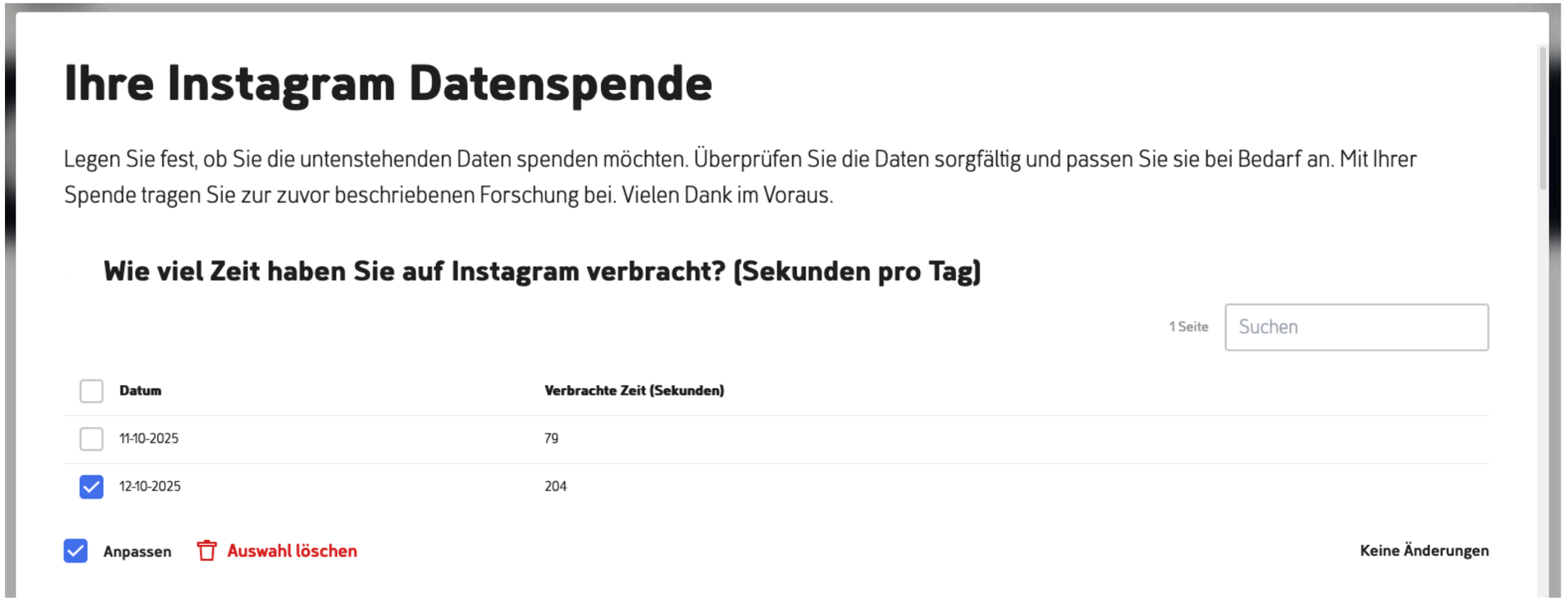
Request manual for LinkedIn on computer



Request manual for Instagram on computer

Extract Data

Inspect Data



Data overview on data donation platform

☑ Data donation

📣 Task: Try it yourself.

You might have already requested and downloaded your data in preparation for today.

Did you encounter any difficulties in sharing your data?

🤔 Questions?

References

Hase, Valerie, Jef Ausloos, Laura Boeschoten, Nico Pfiffner, Heleen Janssen, Theo Araujo, Thijs Carrière, et al. 2024. "Fulfilling Data Access Obligations: How Could (and Should) Platforms Facilitate Data Donation Studies?" *Internet Policy Review* 13 (3). https://doi.org/10.14763/2024.3.1793.

Ohme, Jakob, Theo Araujo, Laura Boeschoten, Deen Freelon, Nilam Ram, Byron B. Reeves, and Thomas N. Robinson. 2024. "Digital Trace Data Collection for Social Media Effects Research: APIs, Data Donation, and (Screen) Tracking." *Communication Methods and Measures* 18 (2): 124–41. https://doi.org/10.1080/19312458.2023.2181319.