

What do people do online?

Using data donation to understand digital behavior.

a workshop at the SPP Junior Researcher Meeting

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Our Agenda

- 1 What is digital trace data?
- 2 What is data donation? – The participant's perspective.
- 3 What is data donation? – The researcher's perspective.

Who are you?

Please raise your hand 🙋 if you ...

- are familiar with the term digital trace data
- have worked with APIs
- have worked with data donation
- have worked with automated content analysis
- regularly use programming languages (e.g., R, Python)

About me: Frieder Rodewald

🎓 PhD, University of Mannheim & Institute for Employment Research

🤔 Research interests: “I study what people do online.”

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About me: Sebastian Prechsl

...

👉 part of the SPP project Integrating Data Donations in Survey Infrastructure



Dr. Valerie Hase

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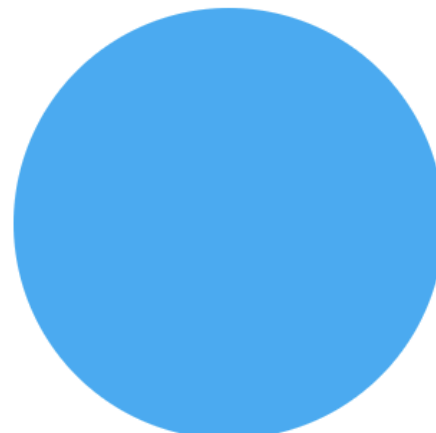
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Our Team

A huge thanks to Valerie Hase, for conceptualizing a previous data donation workshop at CompText in Vienna.

What is the goal of this workshop?

-  Understanding digital data traces as a *type* of data
-  Understanding data donation as a *method* of data access
-  Working through key steps of data donation methods (participant & researcher view)
-  Discussing when (not) to use data donation studies
-  Detailed implementation (e.g., server set-up, coding data extraction scripts)

What is digital trace data?

🤔 Which examples for digital trace data you know?

What is digital trace data?

💡 **Definition:** *The recording and storing of activities on digital platforms to draw conclusions about digital and analog phenomena*

- e.g., tweets, likes, shares on social media
- e.g., geo data (locations, movements)
- e.g., digital payments
- e.g., Spotify playlists

Where can we find/collect digital trace data?

- Apps (e.g., running apps)
- Social media platforms (e.g., Instagram)
- Payment systems (e.g., Paypal)
- Wearable devices (e.g., smart watch)

Which types of data does this include?

Depending on the data collection method... ([Ohme et al. 2024](#)):

- often fine-grained (e.g., time-stamped)
- often longitudinal (e.g., over years, within-individual change)
- often less reactive (e.g., less concerns about social desirability)

Which (latent) constructs can we measure?

- **Internet use** ([Parry et al. 2021](#)) related to ...
 - well-being ([Ohme et al. 2024](#))
 - voting ([Bach et al. 2021](#))
- **News engagement** ([Reiss 2023](#)) related to ...
 - news diversity ([Jürgens and Stark 2022](#))
 - public opinion formation ([Yan, Schroeder, and Stier 2022](#))
- **Movements** related to ...
 - Mobility during pandemics ([Li et al. 2021](#))
 - Social networks ([Sepulvado et al. 2022](#))

Why are digital traces becoming more popular?

🤔 How many minutes a day do you use the internet to consume news?

- „internet“?

- „internet“?
- „news“?

- „internet“?
- „news“?
- „how many minutes“?






Why are digital traces becoming more popular?

- **Problems with self-reported data** (e.g., via survey)
 - Self-reported data subject to specific bias ([Scharkow 2016](#); [Parry et al. 2021](#))
 - Response rates in surveys are declining ([Luiten, Hox, and de Leeuw 2020](#))
- **Availability**
 - cheap (e.g., via APIs)
 - large data sets (“big data”)

⚠️ **Be careful:** These “advantages” are often claimed, but **not** empirically proven.

👉 Digital traces are neither necessarily less biased, nor cheaper, or larger.

(Dis-)advantages of digital trace data

-  More fine-grained, often longitudinal measures due to timestamps
-  Partly measurement of new variables (e.g., algorithmic inference)
-  Bias due to errors in representation and measurement
-  Implementation can be expensive and cumbersome
-  More data does not mean better data!

How can we collect digital traces?

Platform- and user-centric methods

- **Platform-centric** (based on platform cooperation)
 - API ([Jünger 2021](#))
 - Cooperation with platforms ([Wagner 2023](#))
- **User-centric** (based on user cooperation and informed consent) or “follow the user” approaches ([Caliandro 2024](#))
 - Data donation ([Carrière et al. 2025](#))
 - Linkage ([Sloan et al. 2020](#))
 - Sensors ([Struminskaya et al. 2021](#))
 - Tracking ([Christner et al. 2022](#))

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