# **From Data Mining To Data Foraging**

## **A New Relationship with Data**

### **The Limitations of Industrial Approaches**

Traditional data collection often follows an industrial model:

* Focused on volume, velocity, and standardization
* Treats data as a resource to extract and process
* Requires specialized expertise and significant resources
* Often strips away context and emotional nuance
* Values quantity over quality and depth

### **Data as Soil, Not Oil**

**Traditional View**: Data as oil—a resource to extract, refine, and exploit

**Rewilded View**: Data as soil—a living medium to cultivate and nurture

When we see data as soil:

* We become gardeners/ cultivators of insight rather than industrial extractors
* We value nurturing attention over brute force analysis
* We practice patience and attunement rather than just efficiency
* We understand that the richest insights often need time to grow

### **Cultural Composting**

Cultural composting is the practice of:

* Collecting seemingly disconnected signals from across the digital landscape
* Allowing meaning to ferment from these diverse inputs
* Noticing patterns, tensions, and insights that emerge organically
* Creating rich, nutritious soil for strategy and innovation

Examples of "compostable materials":

* Comments on Reddit or YouTube
* Patterns in TikTok videos or Instagram aesthetics
* Recurring phrases in product reviews
* Questions in support conversations

## **The Billion-Person Focus Group Philosophy**

### **Depth Over Volume**

Traditional analytics and research assumes bigger datasets yield better insights. However:

* Small, rich datasets—collected with intention and interpreted with care—often yield more actionable insights
* 10 deeply understood Reddit comments can reveal more than thousands of survey responses
* Traditional methods tend to strip away context and reduce complex human experiences to simplified data points

### **Building a Regenerative Relationship with Data**

A regenerative approach means:

* Creating a relationship where insights can grow and evolve
* Listening with all our senses, not just measuring with predetermined metrics
* Respecting the people behind the data as whole humans with complex experiences
* Giving back value to the communities we learn from

### **AI as a Sensing Partner**

In the industrial model, AI is a processing tool—automating analysis or generating outputs. In our approach, AI becomes a sensing partner:

* Helping detect patterns we might miss
* Seeing connections between seemingly unrelated signals
* Amplifying our capacity to understand nuance
* Collaborating in jazz-like improvisation rather than replacing human judgment

## **Ways of Knowing in Digital Research**

Different questions require different modes of intelligence. These eight core modes are particularly valuable for digital research:

### **1. Pattern-Seeking**

* Finding structure in complexity
* Identifying recurring themes and frameworks
* Questions: "What themes keep showing up? What's the underlying architecture?"
* When to use: Making sense of large amounts of unstructured data

### **2. Signal-Tuning**

* Sensing what's beneath the surface
* Detecting emotional undercurrents
* Questions: "What's being felt but not said? Where's the energy flowing?"
* When to use: Understanding emotional currents or cultural shifts

### **3. Tracking**

* Detecting movement and momentum
* Spotting emerging trends or behaviors
* Questions: "What's shifting in the field? Where is attention moving?"
* When to use: Identifying emerging opportunities before they become obvious

### **4. Experimenting**

* Playful testing and prototyping
* Exploring possibilities through trial and error
* Questions: "What happens if I try this? What feels fresh or risky?"
* When to use: Testing hypotheses or exploring new approaches in low-stakes ways

### **5. Resonating**

* Feeling emotional and aesthetic alignment
* Understanding what connects deeply with people
* Questions: "Does this feel right? Where is the emotional pull strongest?"
* When to use: Assessing how people respond to experiences or messages

### **6. Stewarding**

* Caring for the health of systems
* Identifying breaking points and opportunities for healing
* Questions: "Where are we losing trust? What needs nourishing?"
* When to use: Diagnosing where experiences are breaking down

### **7. Calibrating**

* Aligning strategy and messaging with precision
* Ensuring clarity and coherence
* Questions: "Are we clearly leading? Is our message true and timely?"
* When to use: Refining positioning or communication strategy

### **8. Disrupting**

* Surfacing hidden tensions and taboos
* Identifying avoided conversations
* Questions: "What are we avoiding? Where's the friction or taboo?"
* When to use: Finding opportunities for innovation or differentiation

## **Rewilding Your Research Approach: Practical Examples**

### **Traditional vs. Rewilded Approaches**

| **Activity** | **Traditional Approach** | **Rewilded Approach** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Gathering customer feedback | Standardized surveys sent to thousands | Time spent in subreddits where people naturally discuss your category |
| Understanding usability | Formal usability testing in controlled environments | Screen recordings of real users in their natural context |
| Measuring engagement | Complex dashboards tracking traditional metrics | Visual collections of user-generated content showing authentic usage |
| Identifying needs | Focus groups discussing predefined topics | AI-moderated conversations that follow natural thought patterns |

### **Headspace Case Study**

**Traditional Approach**:

* Surveys about feature preferences and satisfaction
* Focus groups discussing meditation habits
* A/B tests of different interface elements
* Usability studies in controlled environments

**Rewilded Approach**:

* Collecting authentic Reddit discussions about meditation struggles
* Analyzing the visual language across meditation apps to understand emotional positioning
* Recording actual user journeys through the first-time experience
* Using AI-moderated conversations to explore the emotional relationship with meditation

**Different Insights**:

The traditional approach might tell you that 65% of users want more sleep content.

The rewilded approach might reveal the deep emotional tension between wanting meditation to be effortless while also feeling like you're making progress—an insight that could transform product strategy.

## **Reflection Exercise**

1. Which way of knowing feels most natural to you?
   * Are you naturally a Pattern-Seeker, spotting connections across disparate information?
   * A Tracker, noticing subtle shifts in behavior or conversation?
   * A Steward, intuitively sensing when something needs attention or care?
2. Which ways of knowing feel less comfortable or familiar?
   * These might represent opportunities for growth
   * What new lenses could enrich your research practice?
3. How might you begin shifting from extraction to cultivation in your current work?
   * What small practices could you implement immediately?
   * What mindset shifts would be most valuable?

In our next lesson, we'll explore the Five Digital Senses—the specific ways we tune into different types of information in the digital landscape. We'll look at concrete tools and techniques for each sense, building your scrappy research toolkit piece by piece.