

Measuring Citizen's Digital Behaviours Using Web Trackers and Data Donations

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Today's webinar



- 1. Some context
- 2. Quick intro to web tracking data and data donations
- 3. A guide to collecting and using web tracking data
- 4. Break for questions
- 5. Some challenges when using web tracking data
- 6. A guide to collecting and using data donations
- 7. Q&A









Surveys and the new digital era

The digital era of surveys

1. What people do on the digital realm can impact both online and offline phenomena.





The digital era of surveys

- 1. What people do on the digital realm can impact both online and offline phenomena.
- 2. The digitalisation of our lives is making new types of data available





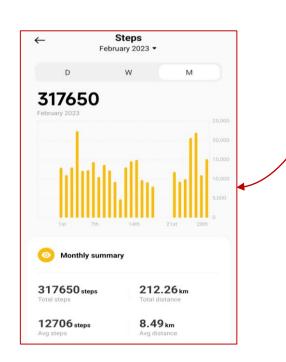
The digital era of surveys



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- 2. The digitalisation of our lives is making new types of data available

We can ask people to selfreport these behaviours

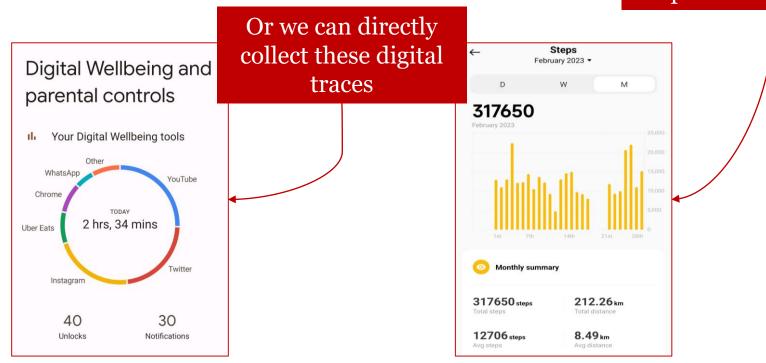




The digital era of surveys

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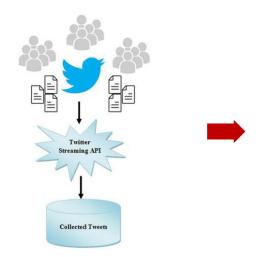
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Measuring what people do online with designed digital data

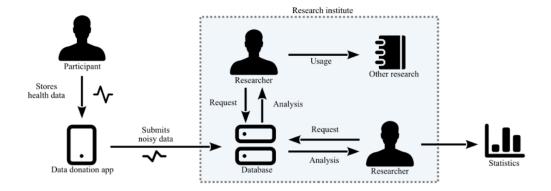
• Most common approach to collect digital traces: collect data directly from the platforms ("Found data")





Measuring what people do online with designed digital data

- Most common approach to collect digital traces: collect data directly from the platforms ("Found data")
- These traces can also be collected in a designed way: for instance, within a survey

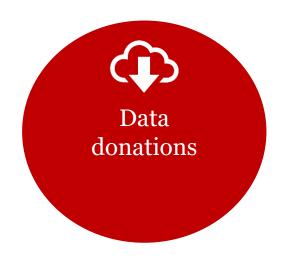


Appenzeller, A., Terzer, N., Krempel, E., & Beyerer, J. (2022, June). Towards private medical data donations by using privacy preserving technologies. In *Proceedings of the 15th International Conference on PErvasive Technologies Related to Assistive Environments* (pp. 446-454).

Measuring what people do online with designed digital data

- Most common approach to collect digital traces: collect data directly from the platforms ("Found data")
- These traces can also be collected in a designed way: for instance, within a survey
- Two main types of designed digital data for understanding digital behaviours







Web tracking data

web data opp

Direct observations of online behaviours using tracking solutions, or *meters*.



Group of tracking technologies (plug-ins, apps, proxies, etc)



Installed on participants devices



Collect traces left by participants when interacting with their devices online: URLs, apps visited, cookies...



Data donations

Users directly provide researchers with data that already has been collected by their devices or platforms



Participants must access this data



Capture it in some way



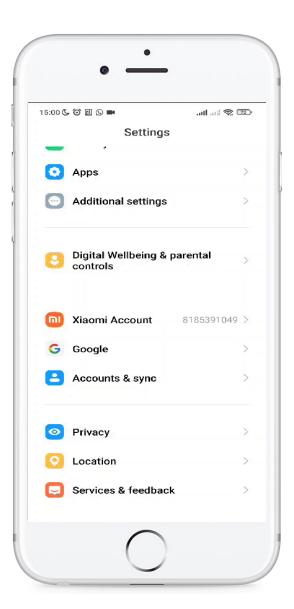
And **share** it with researchers



This **process**, as well as the **traces** collectable, can **vary a lot from project to project**



Platforms that easily allow for this: Meta, Google, Twitter, etc.



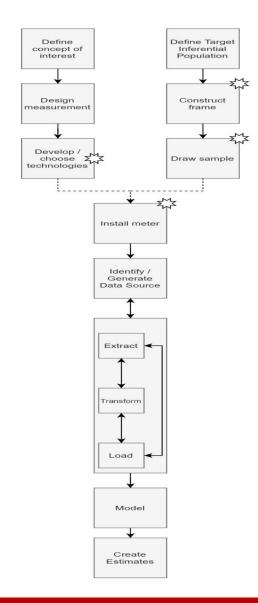
A guide to collecting and using web tracking data

Total Error framework for digital traces collected w/ Meters (TEM)



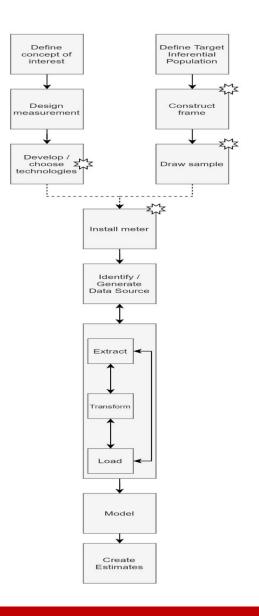
Total Error framework for digital traces collected w/ Meters (TEM)

• In general, web tracking data is used to **make** inferences about a **concept of interes**t for a given **population**



A step-by-step guide





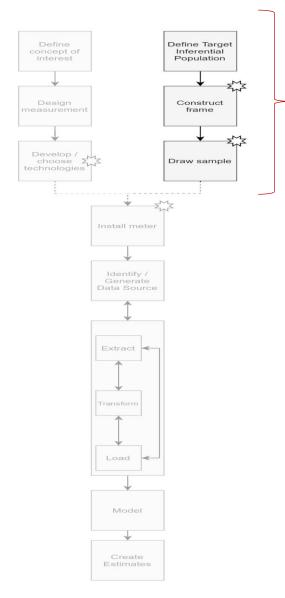
There are many steps to follow when collecting web tracking data.

Many decisions can be made for each step, all with potential impact on data quality

This is rarely acknowledged and understood, we can do better!

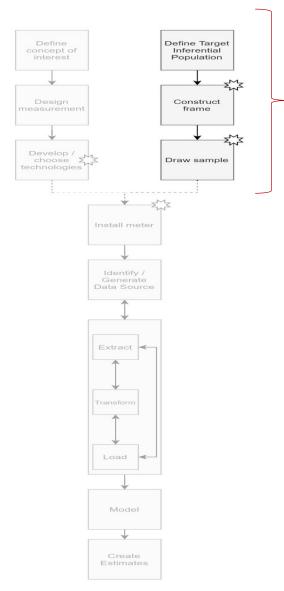


First steps on the representation side: same old, same old



Identical steps as for surveys

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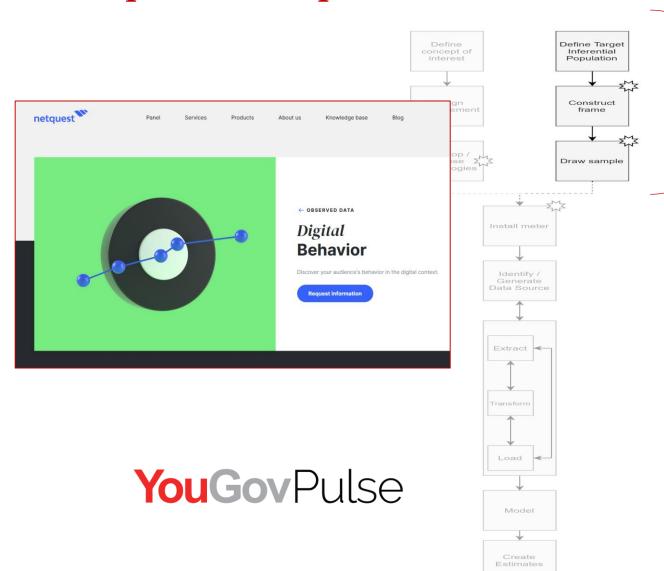
Identical steps as for surveys

Target population: People living in the UK older than 17

Frame: Postal Address Frame

Sample: Simple Random Sampling

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Identical steps as for surveys

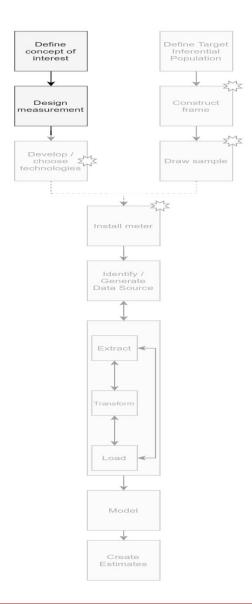
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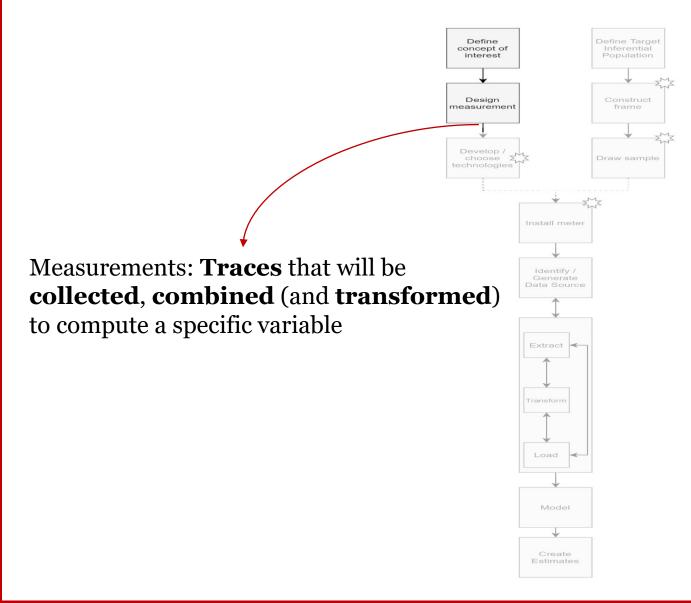
Most commonly: non-probability online panels

From concepts to measurements: similar but different





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From concepts to measurements: similar but different

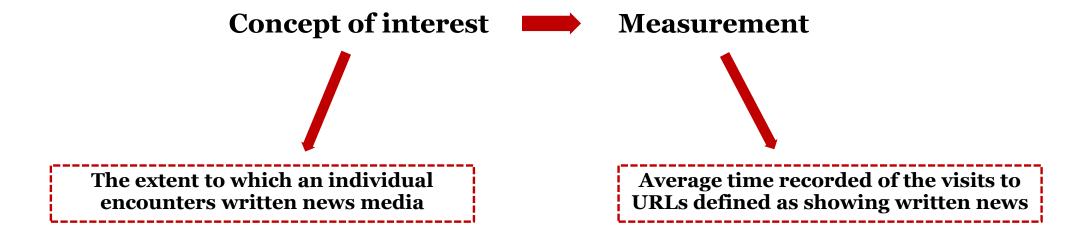
• Normally not acknowledged: it is key to clearly define the traces that will be used to measure a specific concept

Concept of interest Measurement



From concepts to measurements: similar but different

• Normally not acknowledged: it is key to clearly define the traces that will be used to measure a specific concept



From concepts to measurements: similar but different

Concept: average hours of consumption of online political news

Measure: average time recorded of the visits to URLs defined as showing written news

- What traces are considered as a visit?
- Which URLs are considered written news?
- What time frame has been used to compute an average?

From concepts to measurements: similar but different

Concept: average hours of consumption of online political news

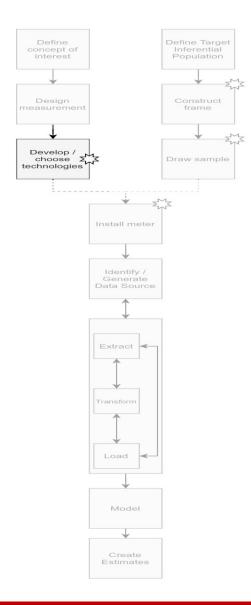
Measure: average time recorded of the visits to URLs defined as showing written news

- What traces are considered as a visit?
- Which URLs are considered written news?
- What time frame has been used to compute an average?

These and other decisions will **determine the measurement used**.

Pretty much as for **surveys** this is determined by the **wording**, **the type of scale**, etc.

Develop or choose the tracking technologies to use

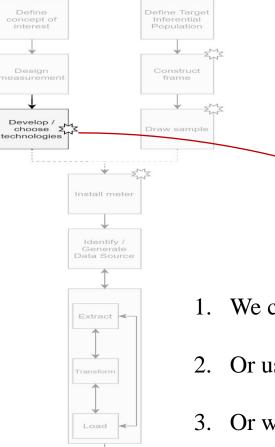


Develop or choose the tracking technologies to use









Model

Estimates

- 1. We can **develop** tracking technologies from scratch
- 2. Or use **open-access** technologies already available
- 3. Or we can use **commercially available** technologies

A heterogeneous group of tracking solutions



• There are many different types of tracking approaches.

A heterogeneous group of tracking solutions

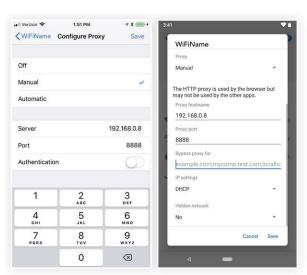
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- These can be: Proxies, VPNs, Screen-scrapers, Screen recorders, Smartphone-log trackers (and maybe more that I am not aware of).

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• They can come in different packages for users: Apps, Browser plug-ins, manual configuration with or without any

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- There are many different types of tracking approaches.
- These can be: Proxies, VPNs, Screen-scrapers, Screen recorders, Smartphone-log trackers (and maybe more that I am not aware of).
- They can come in different packages for users: Apps, Browser plug-ins, manual configuration with or without any piece of software required.
- Their capabilities and limitations vary a lot: not all of them can be installed on all devices. Not all of them can capture the same data. Not all of them have the same level of granularity and accuracy

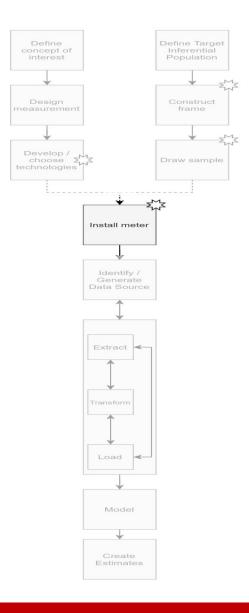
A heterogeneous group of tracking solutions

• Most real-life projects end up using a **combination of approaches**, depending on the devices that people use

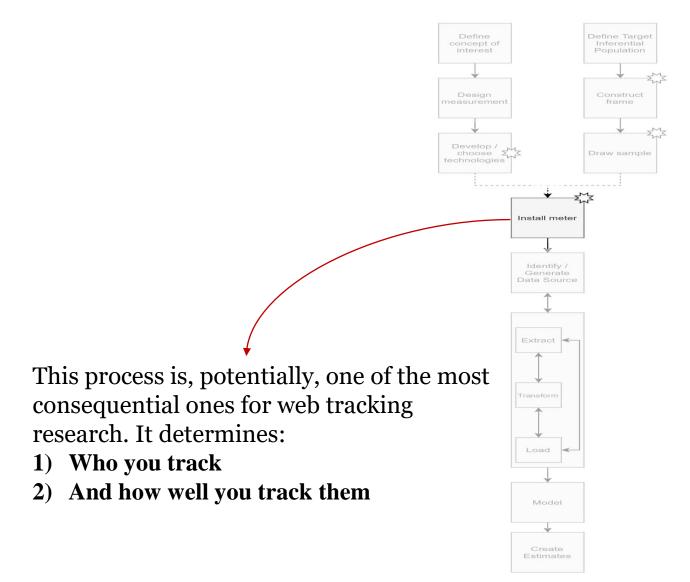
		РС арр		C plug-in	s	Android SDK	iOS proxy
			Chrome	Firefox	Safari	_	
Online track	ing						
URLs	Http traffic	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Https traffic	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
	Incognito sessions	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
	HTML	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
	Time stamps	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Apps	App name	-	-	-	-	Yes	Yes
	App usage start time	-	-	-	-	Yes	Yes
	App usage duration	-	-	-	-	Yes	Estimated
	Offline apps	-	-	-	-	Yes	No
	In-app behaviour	-	-	-	-	No	No
Search terms	Search terms	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Device infor	mation						
Device type	E.g. desktop	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Device brand	E.g. Xiaomi		No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Device model	E.g. S9	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Operating system	E.g. iOS	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
OS version	E.g. 10.1.2	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Internet provider	E.g. Voxi	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes

Could you please, maybe, install this meter?

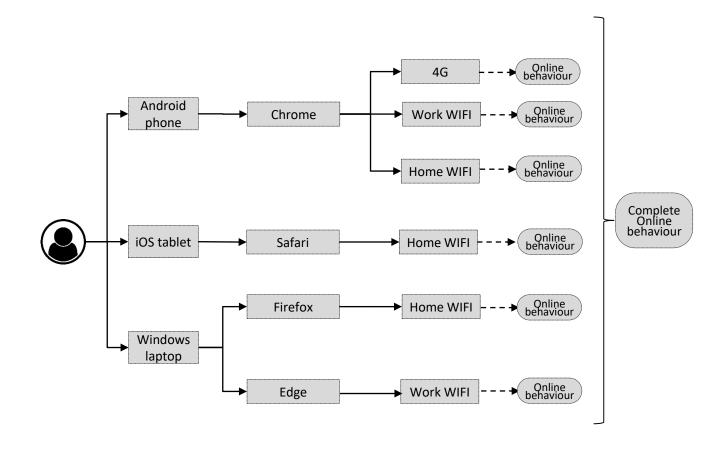




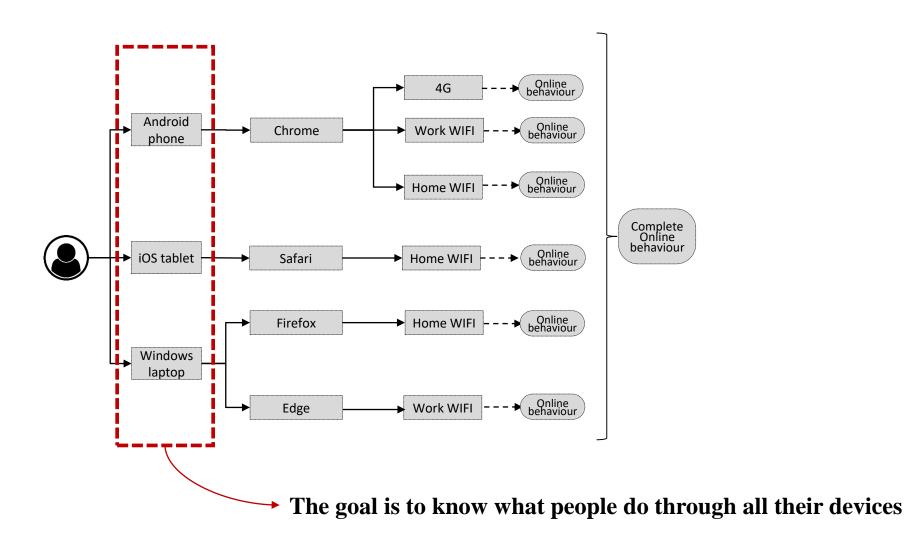
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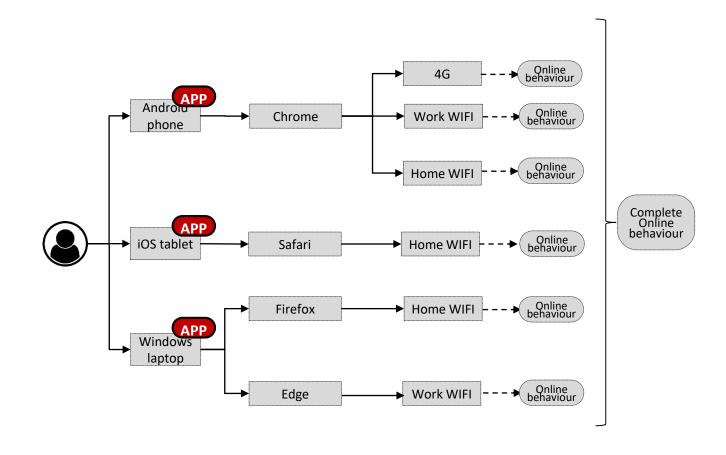
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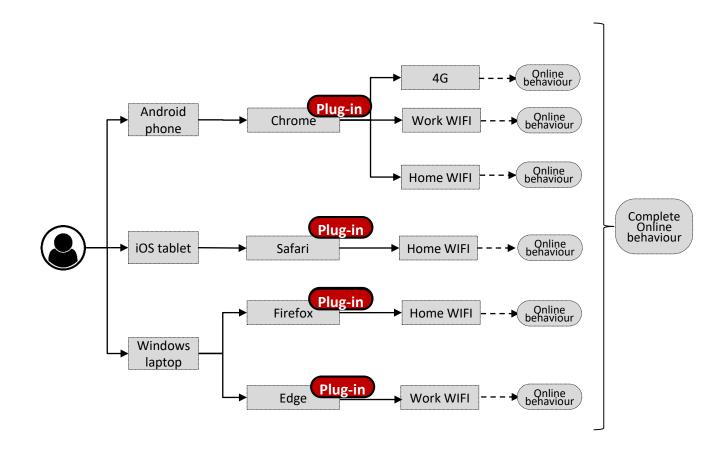


Could you please, maybe, install this meter?



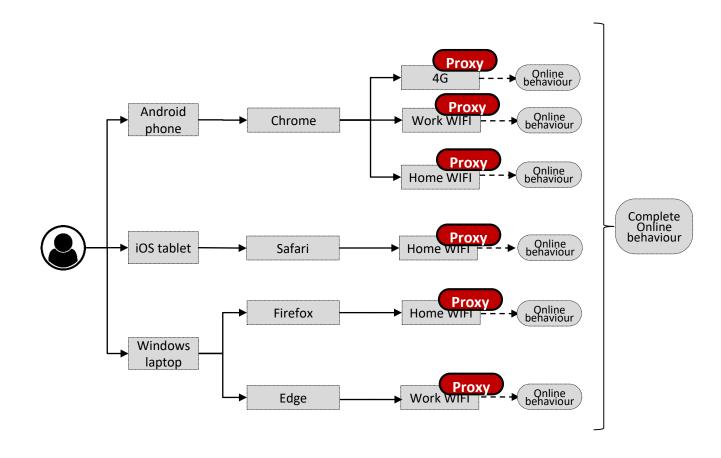
This can be achieved by tracking all devices that someone uses

Could you please, maybe, install this meter?



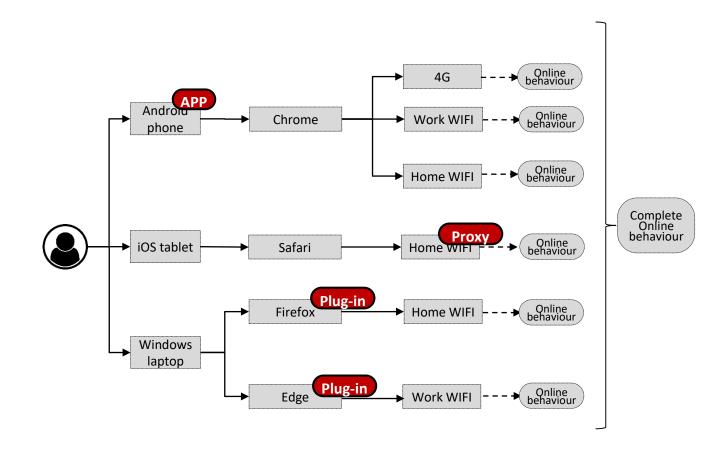
Or all their browsers

Could you please, maybe, install this meter?



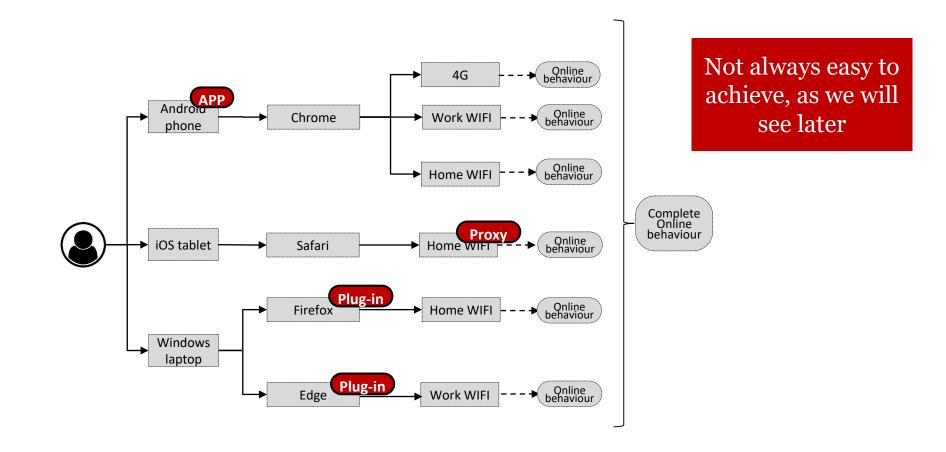
Or all their networks

Could you please, maybe, install this meter?



Or a combination of these (most common)

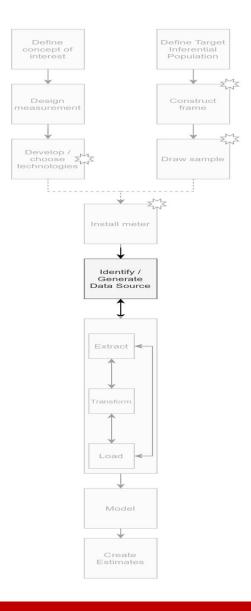
Could you please, maybe, install this meter?



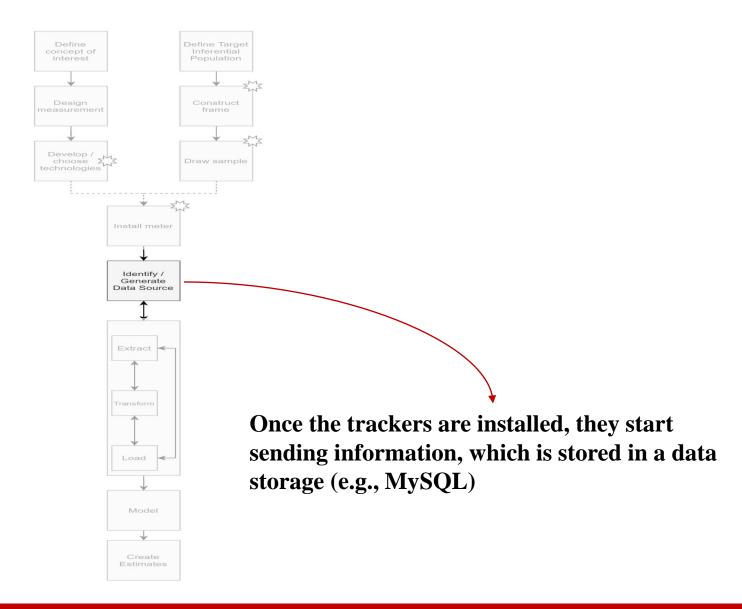
Or a combination of these (most common)

Generate the messy dataset





Generate the messy dataset



Generate the messy dataset



Figure 1: Example of web tracking data excerpt

STARTTIME	URL			
2017-08-13 21:26:45 UTC	HTTPS://WWW.GOOGLE.DE			
	•			
2017-08-13 21:26:50 UTC	HTTPS://WWW.GOOGLE.DE/SEARCH?Q=BÄCKEREI+GEÖFFNET+IN+DER+NAHE			
2017-08-13 21:35:51 UTC	HTTPS://WWW.TWITTER.COM/HOME			
•				
2017-08-08	HTTPS://WWW. YOUGOV.DE/OPI/MYFEED#/ALL			
19:28:10 01 0				
2017-08-08 19:29:10 UTC	HTTPS://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=DQW4W9WGXCQ			
•				
2017-08-08 19:36:17 UTG	HTTPS://WWW.NETFLIX.COM/WATCH/81441579			
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This is one of the **most basic versions** of what information might be recorder (ID, time stamp, and full URL)

Generate the messy dataset

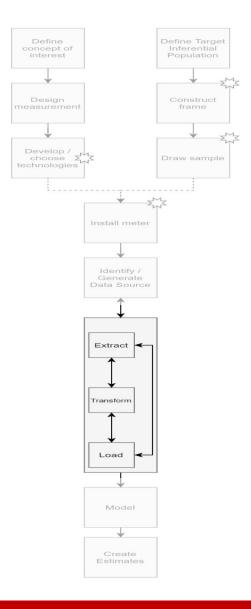


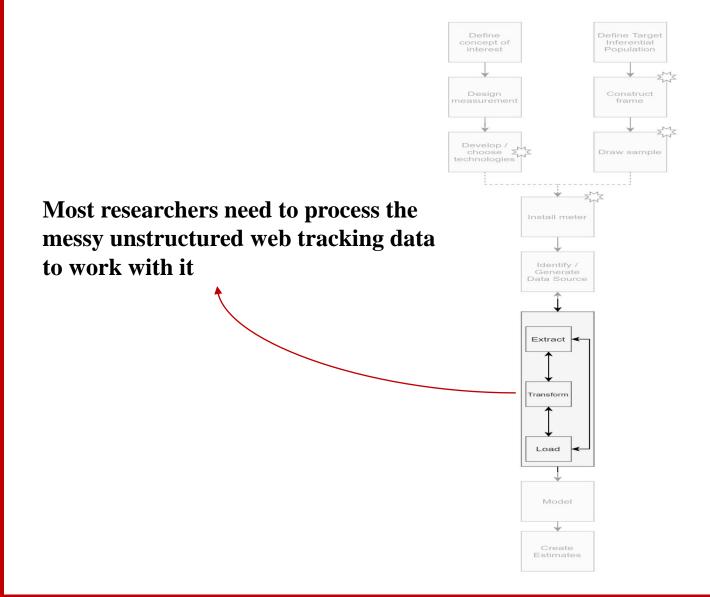
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		•		
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		•		
ID:1310	2017-08-13 21:35:51 UTC	HTTPS://WWW.TWITTER.COM/HOME		
•				
ID:2808	2017-08-08 19:28:10 UTC	HTTPS://WWW. YOUGOV.DE/OPI/MYFEED#/ALL		
	19.20.10 010			
ID:2808	2017-08-08 19:29:10 UTC	HTTPS://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=DQW4W9WGXCQ		
		•		
ID:2808	2017-08-08 19:36:17 UTC	HTTPS://WWW.NETFLIX.COM/WATCH/81441579		

- This is one of the **most basic versions** of what information might be recorder (ID, time stamp, and full URL)
- Other information can be captured, such as **HTML information**. For instance, the **text** each Facebook post seen by a participant, the **number of likes**, the **comments**, why the post was visible, etc.









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Figure 1: Example of web tracking data excerpt

Number of visits to google: 2

Number of visits to video platforms: 2



• The second (*optional*) step is to **transform the extracted data**. This might be needed if the defined measurement requires more than simple counts of URLs.



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 - 1. The content of the URL can be manually identified, and added to the dataset

https://www.theguardian.com/business/live/2023/jul/12/bank-england-warns-rising-interest-rates-stress-indebted-firm

https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2023/jul/12/fashion-rental-four-women-on-the-dresses-making-them-a-fortune

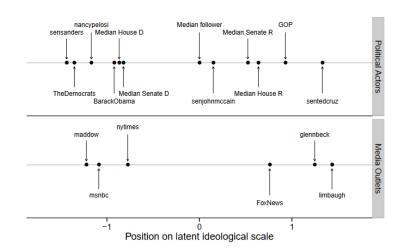
https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2023/jul/11/tennis-wimbledon-elina-svitolina-ukraine-war-iga-swiatek

https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/jul/11/nuclear-bomb-fallout-site-chosen-to-define-start-of-anthropoce



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 - 1. The content of the URL can be manually identified, and added to the dataset
 - 2. The webpages can be classified using external information

Figure S4: Ideology Estimates for Key Political Actors and Media Outlets



Average ideology of participant's media diets

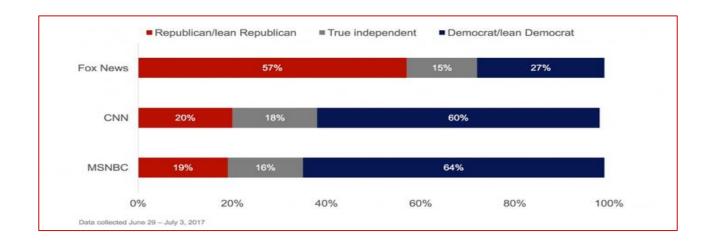


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- The second (*optional*) step is to **transform the extracted data**. This might be needed if the defined measurement requires more than simple counts of URLs.
- Most interesting transformation: enriching the information that URLs bring to research.
 - 1. The content of the URL can be manually identified, and added to the dataset
 - 2. The webpages can be classified using external information
 - 3. Machine learning to codify the content exposed to (text / images / video / etc)
 - 4. Measure non-behavioural concepts: e.g., a person's ideology using Correspondence Analysis





• In the final step the extracted and transformed data sets are *loaded* and stored on the researchers' devices or servers

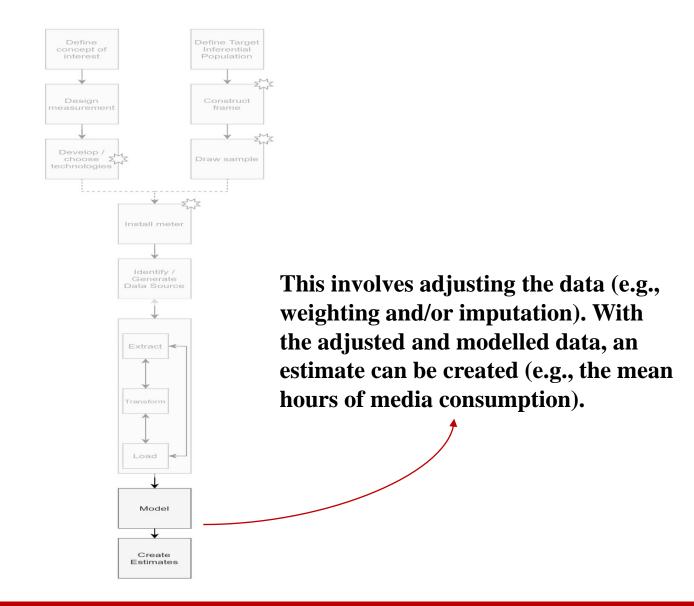


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- In the final step the extracted and transformed data sets are loaded and stored on the researchers' devices or servers
- All these steps can be done **simultaneously or iteratively** (e.g., extracting information, transforming it, loading it back and extracting it again).
- This is a big difference compared with surveys, that:
 - 1. Makes the **pre-processing** stage of the research **harder and longer**
 - 2. But allows for **immense flexibility**, which can be exploited for good

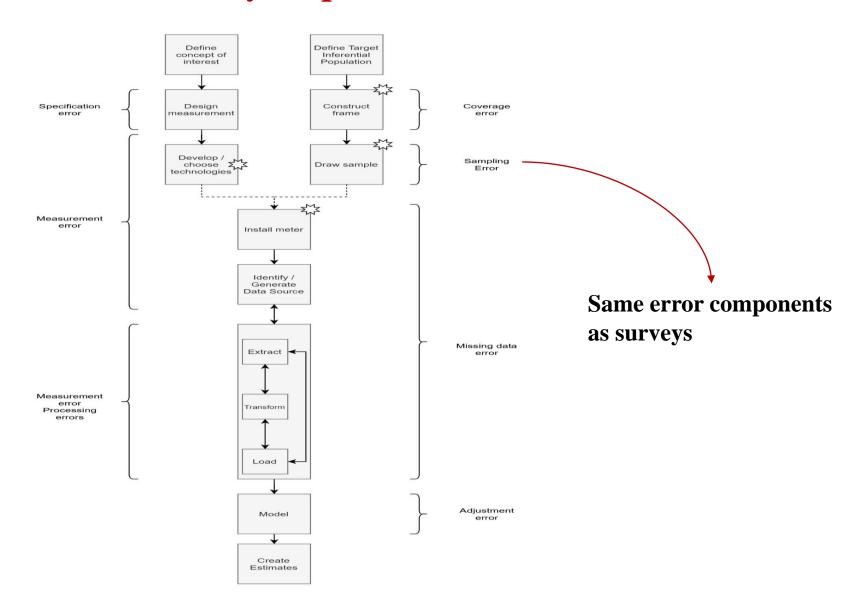
Modelling and estimating: (for now) same old, same old



Break for questions

The challenges and errors of web tracking data

Errors can be introduced in every step



THE CHALLENGES AND ERRORS OF WEB TRACKING DATA

What can cause those errors?



Error components	Specific error causes
Specification error	 Defining what qualifies as valid information
	 Measuring concepts with by-design missing data
	 Inferring attitudes and opinions from behaviours
Measurement error	 Tracking undercoverage
	 Technology limitations
	 Technology errors
	- Hidden behaviours
	- Social desirability
	- Extraction errors
	Misclassifying non-observations Shared devices.
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Processing error	 Coding error
	 Aggregation at the domain level
	 Data anonymization
Coverage error	 Non-trackable individuals
Sampling error	 Same error causes as for surveys
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	Non-consent
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Let's deep dive on this error

Tracking undercoverage



UNCOVERING DIGITAL TRACE DATA BIASES: TRACKING UNDERCOVERAGE IN WEB TRACKING DATA

Oriol J. Bosch^{1, 2, 3}, Patrick Sturgis², Jouni Kuha², Melanie Revilla⁴

¹ Leverhulme Centre for Demographic Science, University of Oxford

Abstract

In the digital age, understanding people's online behaviours is vital. Digital trace data has emerged as a popular alternative to surveys, many times hailed as the gold standard. This study critically assesses the use of web tracking data to study online media exposure. Specifically, we focus on a critical error source of this type of data, tracking undercoverage: researchers' failure to capture data from all the devices and browsers that individuals utilize to go online. Using data from Spain, Portugal, and Italy, we explore undercoverage in commercial online panels and simulate biases in online media exposure estimates. The paper shows that tracking undercoverage is highly prevalent when using commercial panels, with more than 70% of participants affected. In addition, the primary determinant of undercoverage is the type and number of devices employed for internet access, rather than individual characteristics and attitudes. Additionally, through a simulation study, it demonstrates that web tracking estimates, both univariate and multivariate, are often substantially biased due to tracking undercoverage. This represent the first empirical evidence demonstrating that web tracking data is, effectively, biased. Methodologically, the paper showcases how survey questions can be used as auxiliary information to identify and simulate web tracking errors.

Keywords

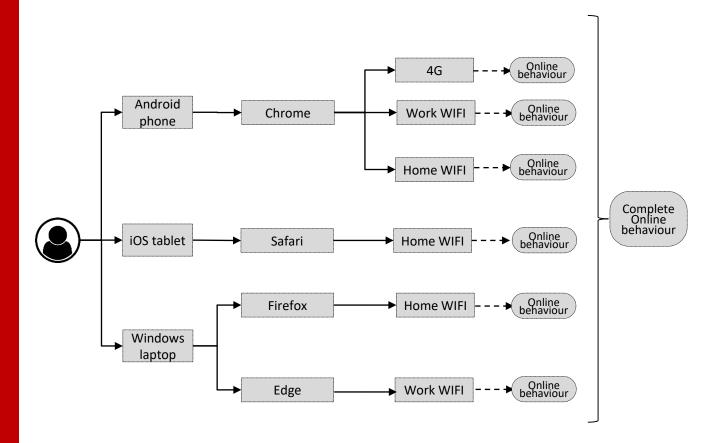
Digital trace data \cdot Web tracking data \cdot Undercoverage \cdot Bias \cdot Media exposure \cdot Monte Carlo simulation

² Department of Methodology, The London School of Economics and Political Science

³ Research and Expertise Centre for Survey Methodology, Universitat Pompeu Fabra
⁴ Institut Barcelona Estudis Internacionals (IBEI)

Tracking undercoverage

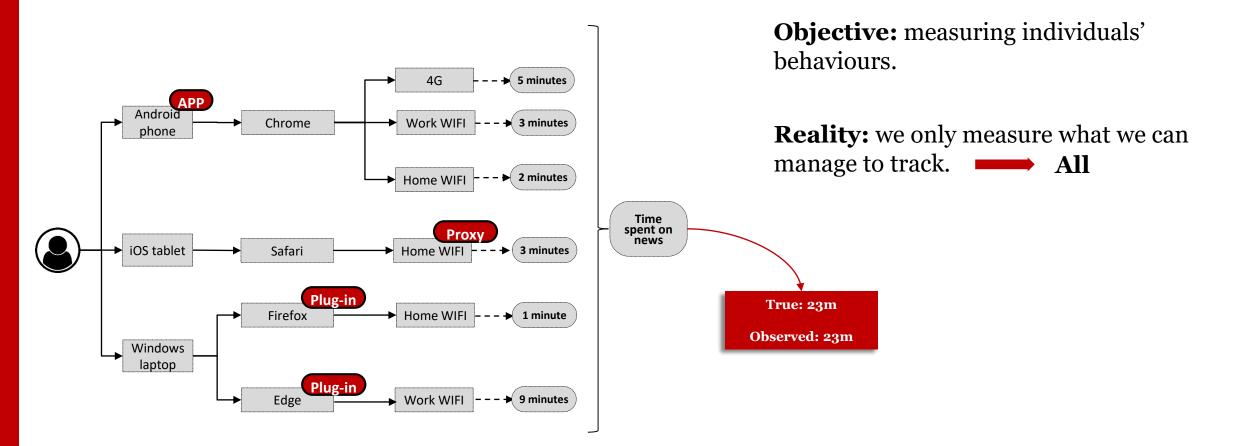




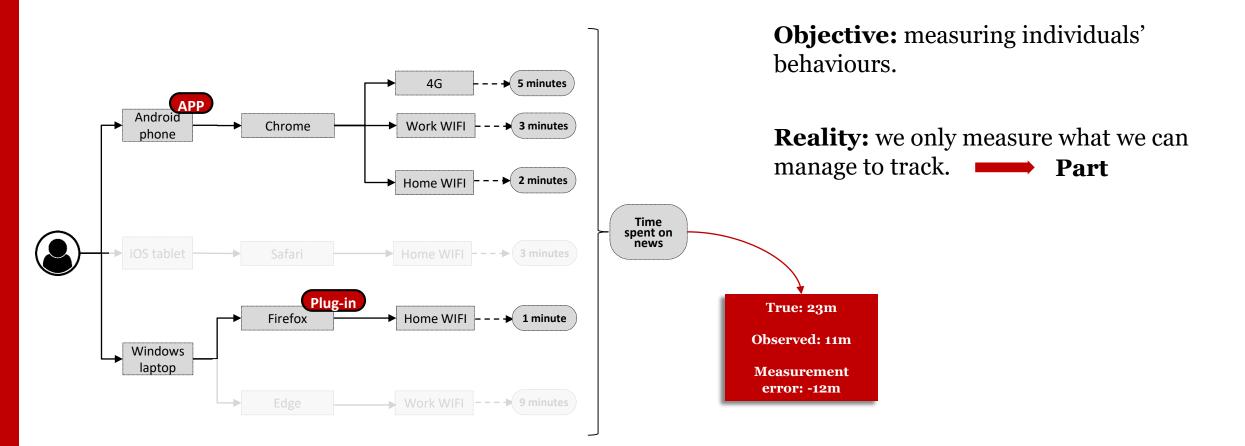
Objective: measuring individuals' behaviours.

Reality: we only measure what we can manage to track.

Tracking undercoverage

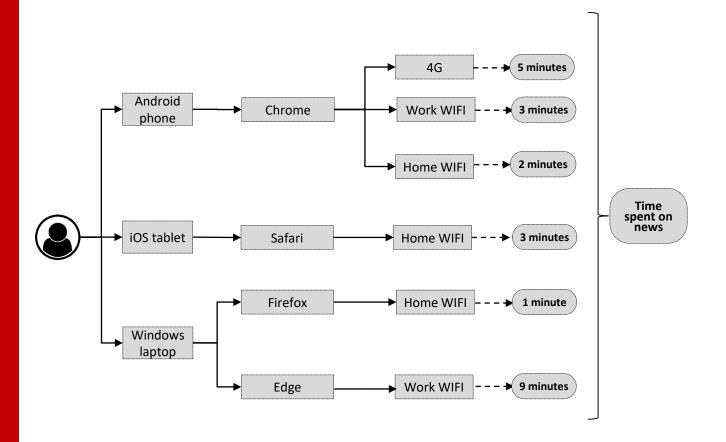


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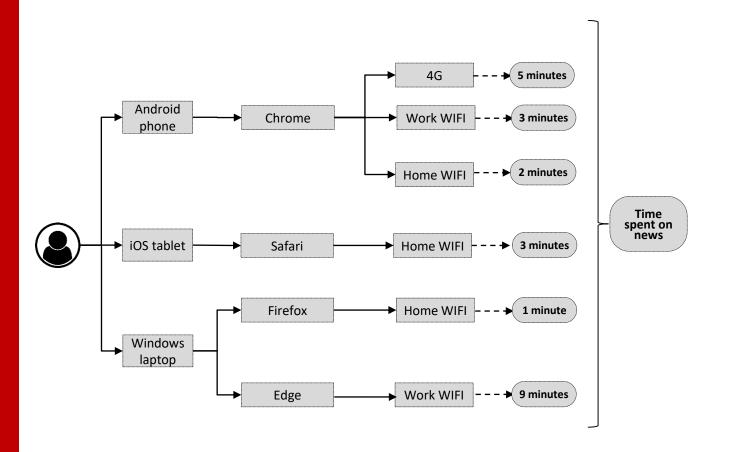


Why is this happening?

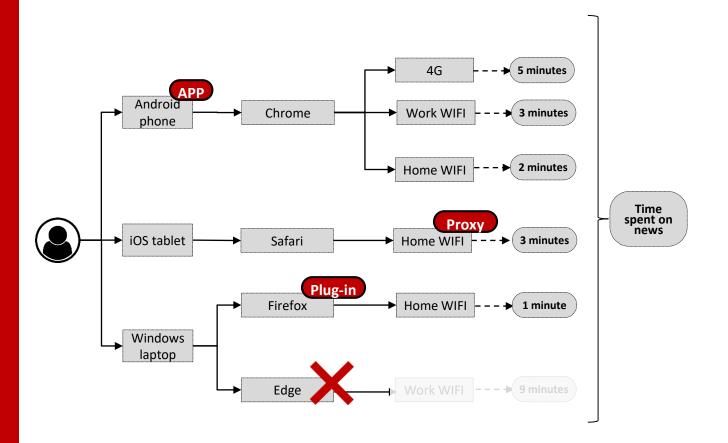








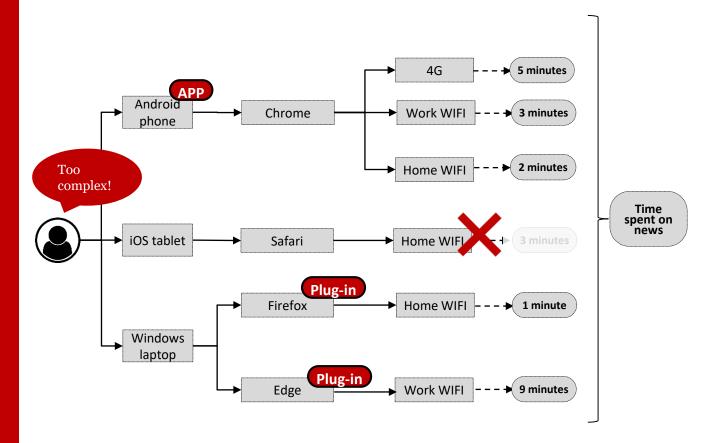




Different reasons:

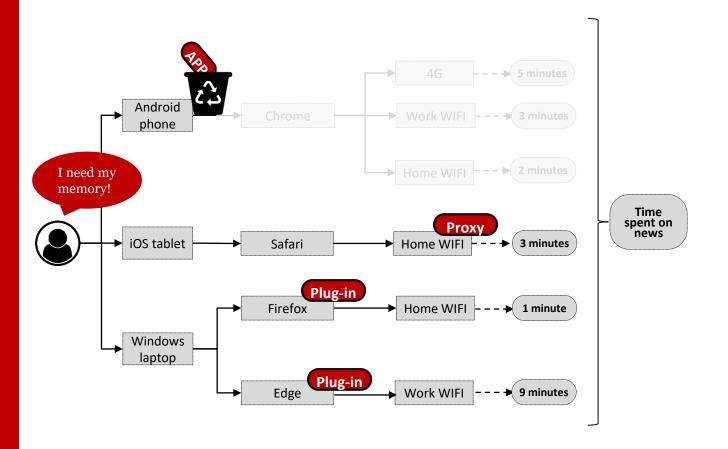
 Some devices / browsers cannot be tracked with available technologies





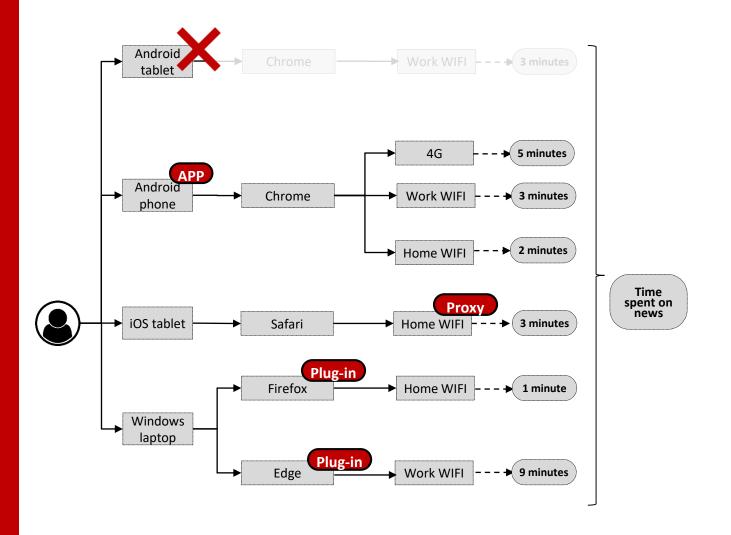
- Some devices / browsers cannot be tracked with available technologies
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- Some devices / browsers cannot be tracked with available technologies
- People might not want to fully comply
- 3. People might uninstall technologies
- **4. New device,** we do not even know they have

How big of a problem is this?

Proportion of participants with all their devices tracked

	% fully covered
All participants	26
Participants who reported using	
1 device	100
2 devices	34
3 devices	13
4 devices	1
+5 devices	0

	% fully covered
Participants who reported using	
PC	
Windows	49
MAC	27
Mobile	
Android	52
iOS	10

How big of a problem is this?

Most people do not have all their devices fully tracked

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→ The higher the number of devices that people use, the more likely it is that we do not fully track them

How big of a problem is this?



Proportion of participants with all their devices tracked

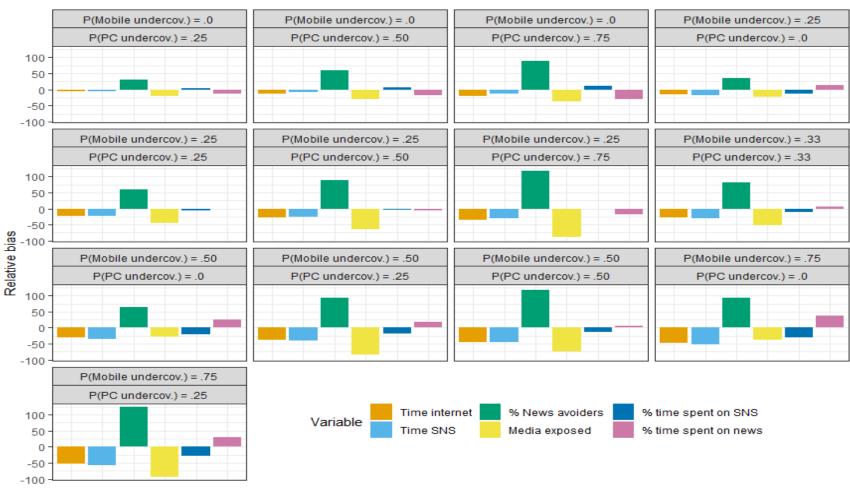
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→ We have a problem with Apple devices! (tech reasons)

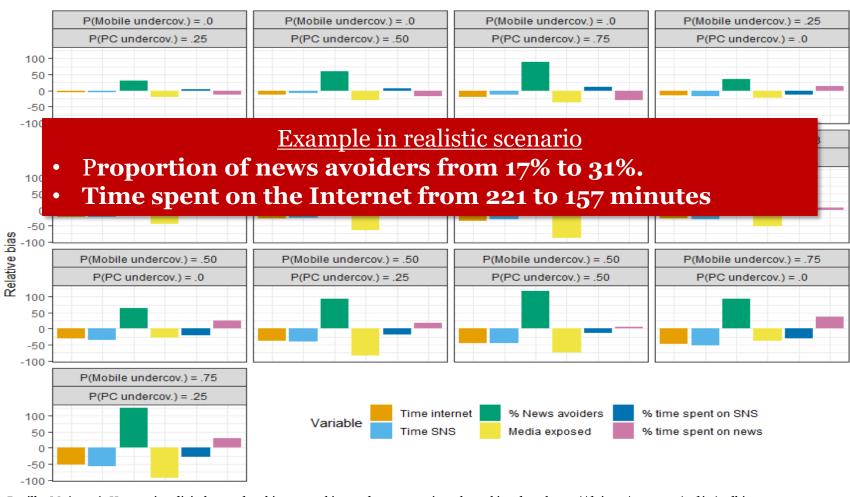
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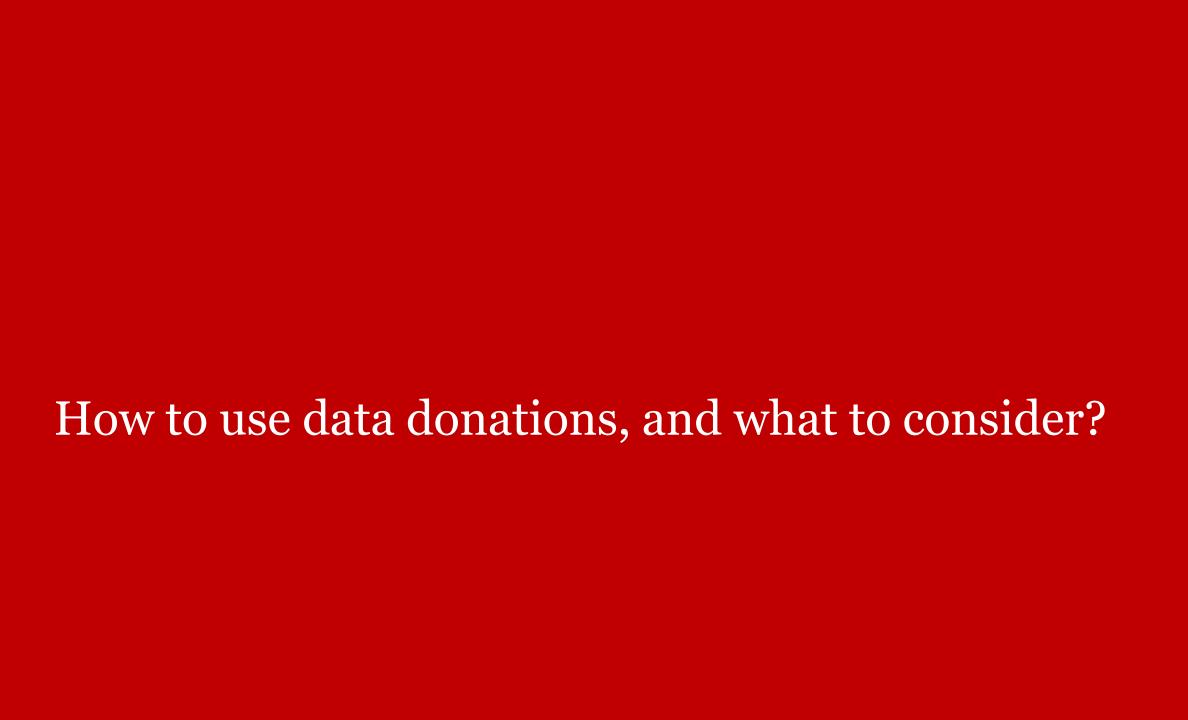
Relative bias introduced by undercoverage, depending on the probability of having all PCs or Mobile devices not covered



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Relative bias introduced by undercoverage, depending on the probability of having all PCs or Mobile devices not covered





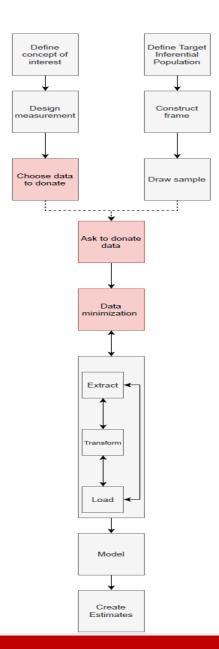
Refreshing our memory



A data donation is any instance in which a person accesses some of their personal data, captures it, and shares it with researchers.

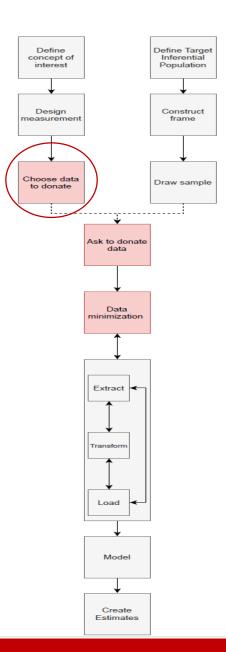
Similar, but different





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We need to identify what available data might work for us

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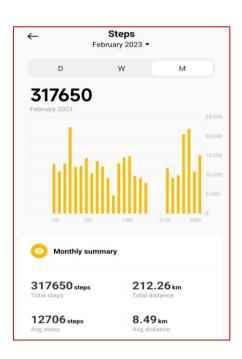
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- To measure a specific concept with data donations, we first need to identify whether there is any **available data** source that participants can access, capture, and share.

We are constrained by what other companies have created and collected. We have no control over what data might exist, and the format of it

Examples of available data (related to digital behaviours)

- Information collected and stored by digital devices. Examples could be:
 - 1. Device, battery and/or memory usage information.
 - 2. Activity and health data.

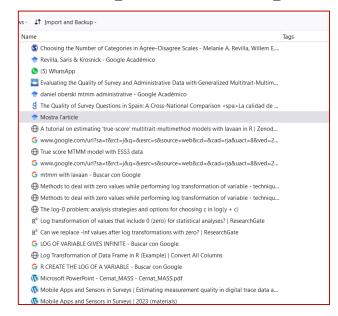




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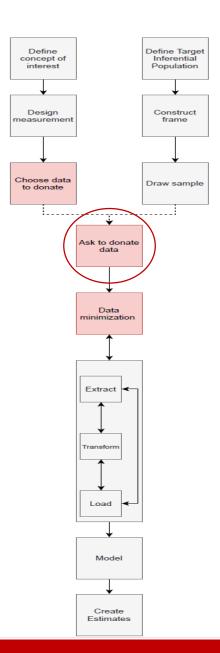
- Information collected and stored by digital devices. Examples could be:
 - 1. Device, battery and/or memory usage information.
 - 2. Activity and health data.
- Information collected and stored by tech companies. Examples could be:
 - 1. Browsing history.
 - 2. Social media usage.
 - 3. Location and travel data.
 - 4. Advertisement data.





Similar, but different





Asking to donate data

- In most cases, when a participant is asked to donate their data, there will always be at least three steps:
 - 1. Access the data
 - 2. Capture it
 - 3. And share it with the researchers

Asking to donate data

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 - 1. Access the data
 - 2. Capture it
 - 3. And share it with the researchers

Goal: make design decisions across these three dimensions that minimises the required effort of participants to share data, while allowing us to collect the necessary data

How can participants capture and share their data?



Capture

- Take pictures or screenshots
- Take videos or video recordings
- Download the information
- Manually annotate the data / memorize (not ideal).

Share

- Upload within the questionnaire.
- Upload in an outside system.
- Send the data using e-mails or secure sharing systems.
- Manually record the data.

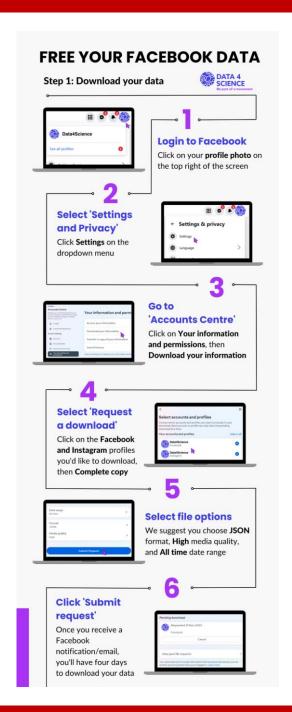
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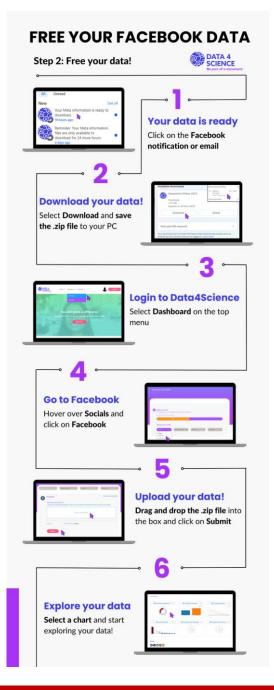
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 - For instance: downloading a **Data Download Package (DDP)** can be a long and burdensome process. Can take more than one day from the point that the participants asks for the data, and the data is available.







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- Similarly, the **amount of data collectable** and the **perceived privacy concerns** might potentially be affected by the method used.

How can participants capture and share their data?

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 - For instance process. Care and the dat

Sometimes we might not be able to choose! Some data can only be captured in specific ways.

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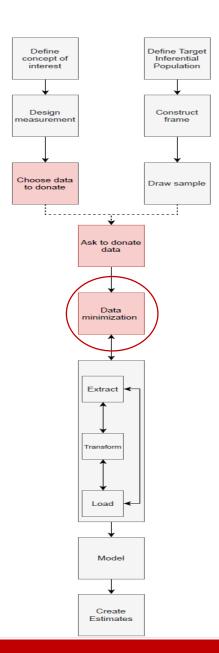
• Similarly, the **a** potentially be a

For example: device usage data cannot (most of the times) be downloaded in any way

oncerns might

Similar, but different





Minimizing the data



- In most cases, the data that people will donate will be plagued with sensitive information
- Data must be minimized, either locally, or before being saved in the servers, to make sure no unintended and sensitive data is collected
- This will normally involve a lot of complex coding, so get ready

Q & A





Thanks!

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orioljbosch



https://orioljbosch.com/





before March 1st 2024

The courses:

- Ecological Inference: deciphering individual voting behavior from aggregated data
 - Taught by Jose Pavia, University of Valencia
 - o 11 12 March 2024





- Going Beyond Conventional Web Surveys: using new types of data in online surveys
- o Taught by Melanie Revilla,
- Barcelona Institute of International Studies
- o 13 15 March 2024
- Measuring Citizens' Digital Behaviours Using Web Trackers and Data Donations
 - Taught by Oriol Bosch University of Oxford
 - o 13 15 March 2024



 All Winter School participants have access to the WEB DATA OPP workshop, sharing the latest research on the use of new data types in online survey studies (18 -19 March 2024)!





contact us: recsm@upf.edu







