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From Generosity to Frustration



Research Community Reveals Obstacles in Online Platforms' Data Access

UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM
AUGUST 2024

Risks and benefits of online platforms

While online platforms offer many benefits, they also pose significant risks. The [European Commission](#) has identified multiple risks, such as spreading misinformation, monetizing harmful content, and creating rabbit holes, which can lead to mental health problems, increased polarization, radicalization, and societal fragmentation.

To understand the risks and benefits of online platforms, researchers need access to the content shared on these platforms, which comes with significant challenges. Some platforms offer researchers specific tools, called APIs, to access platform data. However, these APIs are often riddled with numerous restrictions and subject to frequent changes, making it a Herculean task to conduct comprehensive and accurate research on the risks and benefits of these platforms.

Data donation studies

Several recent acts and regulations, such as the European General Data Protection Regulation ([GDPR](#)), have opened a pathway for researchers to access platform content. This is possible through platform users' right to download their data archives.

These privacy acts and regulations have spurred 'data donation research projects,' where platform users play a crucial role by willingly contributing their data archives for research. These projects hold the potential for researchers to assess platform content and enlighten users about their digital activities, thereby promoting informed and responsible use of these platforms.

At a 2024 international [Data Donation Symposium](#), researchers agreed that data donation is an important method to assess platform benefits and risks. However, many researchers reported significant challenges in their data donation studies. To gauge these challenges, we administered a short survey to these researchers after the symposium. This report shares the results of this survey.

Platforms under study

Of the 51 researchers who completed the survey, 35 have been actively involved in different data donation studies. Table 1 shows that these 35 studies focused on 17 different platforms. The most investigated platforms were TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook.

Table 1

Online Platforms Used in Data Donation Studies

Platform	% studies ¹	# studies
TikTok	49	17
Instagram	40	14
Facebook	37	13
YouTube	34	12
Google	31	11
Twitter	20	7
WhatsApp	14	5
Netflix	8	3
Apple Health	8	3
Samsung Health	6	2
Other, namely... ²	20 ²	7

¹ Percentages are based on 35 data donation studies. Survey allowed for multiple responses.

² Platforms mentioned only once: Snapchat, Messenger, Garmin, Safari, Firefox, Clue, LinkedIn.

Table 2

Common Problems in Platform Data Donations by Researchers¹

	% studies	# studies
Data package incomplete (missing data types)	63	22
Data package incomplete (only limited time range)	48	17
Data package inaccurate	51	18
Data package empty	17	6
Unannounced changes in data downloads	17	6
Documentation complex or unclear	11	4
Data package not accessible/difficult to access	11	4
Experienced no problems	14	5

¹ Percentages based on 35 data donation studies. Survey allowed for multiple responses.

Platforms fail to comply with privacy acts

Of the researchers who have conducted one or more data donation studies, 86% indicated having experienced significant problems with the donated data archives from almost all investigated platforms. Almost all platforms fail to comply with privacy acts like the GDPR, resulting in data archives that are inaccessible, incomplete, or inconsistent over time, rendering them unreliable and invalid for both users and researchers.

Urgent call for platform transparency and regulation compliance

Platform users have the fundamental right to access and download an easily accessible, comprehensive, well-documented, and consistent copy of all the data platforms hold on them, which they can then donate to researchers. However, this right is often obstructed by platforms. Access to data archives is not just important—it is crucial. It empowers citizens and fuels indispensable research. We are calling for immediate action: platforms must establish transparent procedures for user access and comply with regulations, and governments must rigorously enforce these regulations. Only then can we pave the way for a safe and secure digital future.

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