

ABIDA – Assessing Big Data

In-depth study Online Media and social Networks – Workshop report
Amsterdam, 21/22 June 2018

„The Tracked Society. Interdisciplinary Approaches on Online Tracking“

Expert Workshop

As part of the ABIDA project, the ABIDA expert workshop on the in-depth study of online media and social networks took place on 21 and 22 June at the University of Amsterdam under the heading "The Tracked Society - Interdisciplinary Approaches on Online Tracking". In advance, ten papers dealing with online tracking issues were selected in a call-for-paper procedure. In the course of the event, invited speakers presented the authors' papers and commented critically on them. After a further phase of revision, the papers are to be submitted to a journal with the aim of releasing a special issue on the topic of web tracking.

In addition to the papers, further relevant questions of web tracking were discussed. On the first day of the workshop Anne Helmond, Fernando van der Vlist and Esther Weltevrede from the University of Amsterdam in cooperation with the University of Amsterdam gave a keynote speech on the topic "Mapping the infrastructures of the Tracking Society". *Following the first half of the ABIDA project, which involved obtaining a comprehensive overview of the social impact of Big Data through working groups, symposia and citizens' conferences, the workshop was representative for the second half of the project, in which the aim is now to develop and examine pointed positions, to gain additional expertise and to derive recommendations for action.*

1. Day of the Workshop

On the first day Anne Helmond, Fernando van der Vlist and Esther Weltevrede from the University of Amsterdam outlined in their keynote speech how to approach the "Tracked Society" using digital methods. First, an introductory discussion was held on what tracking is all about – even though it was recognized on both days that a uniform definition could hardly be developed at this point. Participants agreed that tracking affects both those whose data are being tracked and – through the measures resulting from the tracking – those who escape these methods (if this is possible at all). Anne Helmond also drew attention to the fact that tracking is not only used for advertising purposes, but also for political purposes, e.g. the Social-Credit-System in China.

From a technical point of view, a distinction must first be made between cookies, widgets¹, or even beacons². In addition, tracking is also done by Canvas-Fingerprinting³ or WiFi in shops.

¹ Standalone and small program windows located on the screen and used interactively; they display information such as weather forecasts or calendars. Widgets can also be integrated into a website, where they often display content from third parties.

Some of the technologies used are also undergoing a functional change, e.g. in the case of cookies, which were initially used to improve the usability of websites but are now increasingly being used to profile site visitors.

The keynote concluded with good reasons to continue studying the "Tracked Society": First of all, it is necessary to investigate the dissemination of monitoring infrastructures and to make the connections which can be found in them explicit. According to Helmond, van der Vlist and Weltevrede, the individual players of webtracking, their interests and their connections must be emphasised even more. Beyond the commercial monitoring of users, the main focus must lie on the possibilities of political monitoring – especially the identification of instruments originally developed for commercial purposes which could also be used or even abused for political purposes.



From left to right: Dr. Barbara Kolany-Raiser and René König (ABIDA-Team) with Fernando van der Vlist, Esther Weltevrede and Anne Helmond from the University of Amsterdam.

² A beacon is a transmitter or receiver on which radio technology is based, usually Bluetooth or RFID. In contrast to cookies, which are purely digital, tracking is done by carrying a physical brand.

³ This term refers to methods in which user activities are tracked without the use of cookies; when the user accesses the site, a "fingerprint" is created with which the user can subsequently be recognised. This "digital fingerprint" can be created by combining browser settings or other information that the page server receives. This does not create an unequivocal allocation, but a statistically very probable one.

2. Day of the Workshop

On the second day of the workshop, the papers submitted were put up for discussion. This opened up the complexity of the subject area.

First, the question was raised to what extent online data and the linked tracking can be included in research in the social sciences; how to deal with technical, ethical or conceptual challenges that arise in the course of this process? As an important aspect of the social science work, the participants saw the discussion of so-called "chilling effects" – how do people behave when they know or at least assume that they are being tracked? To what extent does such anticipatory behavior distort social science findings?

Web tracking is also an important topic in the journalistic industry. Can media that track their addressees thereby create more informational diversity or is it more likely to be the opposite? Subsequently, one participant suggested that there may also be situations or areas where diversity is not necessarily positive. Especially journalistic publications can evoke intense emotions in the addressee. It is therefore of great interest under which circumstances the mood of a person can be tracked. First of all, we have to distinguish between short-term emotions and a longer lasting mood. In the journalistic field, for example, certain events could be presented in a way that makes it easier for the addressee to process them, taking into account the respective mood. Equally exciting are the motives of the users to share their emotions and the underlying circumstances – is it a kind of "digital diary" or do users rather act to generate a reaction and "be heard"?

Subsequently, the different ways in which data can be generated for social science purposes were discussed. The data could be collected independently or acquired by market research companies; a cooperation with data collecting companies is also conceivable. This leads to specific problems in each case. If, for example, data are collected independently, high acquisition costs and additional personnel costs arise. In the case of purchased data, however, it should be noted that there is always a risk of "doctored" or incomplete datasets. As a solution, "public-private-partnerships" from third-party providers were proposed.

A study filtered out the pages most frequently visited by EU citizens and in a second step examined them in terms of their trackers. In this respect, it was noted that it would be interesting to examine pages visited less frequently and then to present and interpret the differences. A methodological study, which tracked individual households in Sweden, outlines a picture of what people are willing to share. In this process, the entire data traffic of all households was recorded. Paradox appeared as follows: At the beginning, the parties agreed to have data collected and shared for research purposes. When asked again later in an abstract way, about half of the participants were unwilling to share their data with these very actors – this allows the conclusion that even informed persons do not fully understand the consequences of their online activities and data exchange. In this respect, there is still a considerable need for research in order to find reasons for the so-called "privacy paradox" and, in the best case, also countermeasures. Equally important is the "privacy paradox" in the offline sector, whereby the differentiation between the online and offline world was rightly discussed critically. These areas are so interconnected that a clear separation does not seem possible. Current examples are Smart Homes and Smart Cities – the alleged offline world "goes online".

The revelations by Edward Snowden in summer 2013 have shown changes in the behaviour of users. It became apparent that the number of users of the data protection friendly search engine "Duck-DuckGo" increased after the revelations. With regard to the "privacy paradox", it should be noted that people are very willing to adapt their behaviour to the methods of web

tracking, according to this controversially discussed thesis. This raises the question of whether such a change of mind can also be achieved through objective educational work or whether far-reaching events are required in this respect.

Another contribution to the discussion drew attention to the special sensitivity of marginalized groups in connection with trackers on pornographic sites. Especially in countries that make sexual attitudes such as homosexuality punishable, the user profiles generated in this way can have precarious consequences for the people concerned.

The ABIDA-Team would like to thank the University of Amsterdam, the authors and discussants for the interdisciplinary exchange on web tracking.

GEFÖRDERT VOM



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