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THE DIGITAL DATA DOUBLE STANDARD: ECONOMIC VALUE EXTRACTION VERSUS SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE LIMITATION AND THE OPPORTUNITIES OF DATA DONATION

by *Dario Pizzul and Alessandro Caliandro**

Abstract

Social science research with digital data faces ethical and technical challenges, often intensified by Research Ethics Committees (RECs). While RECs provide oversight, their criteria - rooted in medical fields - may not align with social research, especially in qualitative studies. This paper introduces the concept of a "digital data double standard," highlighting how private platforms exploit vast user data while researchers face strict access limitations. In the post-API era, alternative methods like scraping and tracking are explored, with "data donation" emerging as a promising solution. This approach allows users to voluntarily share their digital traces, balancing ethical compliance and research needs. By embracing data donation, RECs could better support digital social research, addressing the growing gap between corporate data use and academic inquiry.

Keywords

Data donation, digital methods, research ethics committees

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1. INTRODUCTION

Research ethics is an issue often heavily dependent on the work of boards or committees, such as institutional review boards (IRB) in the US or research ethics committees (RECs) in Europe. These bodies, and particularly their criteria and approaches, have frequently been criticized, especially by scholars in the social sciences, and more specifically by those who employ qualitative methodologies (Schrag, 2011; Roth and von Unger, 2018; Van Den Hoonaard, 2019). The role of ethics committees in social science research is a well-documented issue, with numerous criticisms and complaints highlighting their weaknesses (Bosk, 2007; Brown, 2023). A central argument against RECs' work is that their criteria are largely derived from medical and biological disciplines, particularly randomized controlled trials. When these paradigms are applied to social science projects, unreasonable critiques and caveats often arise, as inappropriate principles are used due to a lack of field-specific expertise (Schrag, 2011). This leads to the necessary flexibility required in qualitative research being perceived as non-rigorous or pseudo-scientific by RECs (Bosk, 2007). As a result, social scientists often view RECs as obstacles to their research endeavors (Brown et al., 2020). Some argue that the impact of RECs, and what has been termed the "seduction of ethics", affects social research on a more fundamental, systematic level. RECs guidelines, lacking specific knowledge of social science methodologies, tend to push all projects toward a uniform standard, thereby stifling creativity and pioneering work in favor of adherence to ethical codes. This has led some to suggest that the richness of social science is gradually being diminished, moving toward more conventional approaches (Van Den Hoonaard, 2019).

It almost goes without saying that the many criticisms to RECs do not undermine the importance of ethics in social science research (De Wet, 2010; Van Den Hoonaard, 2019). The central issue is the bureaucratic interpretation of ethics by committee members—a topic that has long been subject to reflection and calls for reform, alongside suggestions for possible solutions to the widely recognized problems (Bosk, 2007).

This work engages with this ongoing challenge, focusing on a relatively underexplored but important issue: research ethics in social science when dealing with digital data, particularly concerning the role of RECs. Data ethics has been identified as a new branch of ethics specifically focusing on data and algorithms (Floridi and Taddeo, 2016). While the ethics of digital data has been widely discussed in relation to biomedical projects (Dobrik et al., 2018; Ferretti et al., 2021; 2022), social science -

especially through its engagement with digital methods - has also taken the topic seriously (Caliandro and Gandini, 2017; Caliandro et al., 2024). Experts in internet research have been working to develop guidelines for ethically engaging with digital data (Markham and Buchanan, 2012). However, it is well understood that universal prescriptions concerning ethics in social science research with digital data cannot be established (Floridi and Taddeo, 2016; Caliandro, 2021). Among these valuable contributions, the topic of the role of RECs requires further exploration as it has not been extensively considered.

We first add an additional "complaint" to the "chorus" of ones that have been rising through the years against how RECs have been evaluating ethics in qualitative social research (Bosk, 2007). By briefly recalling a personal research experience, we introduce the concept of a "digital data double standard", which on the one hand sees almost unlimited access to personal data by private platforms, and on the other, strongly limits the activity of researchers. We structure our argument around two core issues in social science research involving digital data: the ethical limitations imposed by rigid RECs principles and the technical limitations of data collection. Regarding the latter, we discuss how recent policies implemented by private platforms - primarily the closure of social media APIs[1] - have further hindered research efforts. We examine two potential workarounds, scraping and tracking, considering their advantages within the current digital methods landscape, while also acknowledging their limitations, particularly in terms of ethical data collection. To address these challenges and confront the data double standard, we explore the concept of "data donation" (Boeschoten et al., 2022; Ohme et al., 2024), a practice primarily studied from a methodological perspective but one that could offer significant ethical advantages. This approach has the potential to align with RECs guidelines while providing researchers with richer and more valuable data for their studies.

[1] Since in computer science the concept of API (i.e., Application Programming Interface) has a broad scope, it is worth stressing that, in this article, when we talk about APIs we are referring to social media APIs - insofar social media have been the principal (if not the only, in some cases) field of research for digital sociologists in the last two decades. Social media APIs are interfaces (that is - to put it very simply - a set of routines, protocols, and lines of code) provided by social media platforms themselves, that «let users interact with or respond to data or service requests from another programme, [or] applications» (Murugesan, 2007: 36). In this way users can retrieve data directly from the targeted social media platform (Caliandro and Gandini, 2017)

2. DIGITAL DATA DOUBLE STANDARD

To reflect on the role of RECs we rely here on a sort of 'auto-ethnography' (Risi et al., 2020), that is, we discuss (and critically reflect) on the (tortuous) journey we undertook to see our research project (Digital Literacy and Learning[2]) accepted by the ethical board of the University of X[3]. In the spring of 2024, we conducted a study on citizens' digital literacy. While providing too many details about the study could compromise the anonymity we have sought to preserve through the use of fictitious names, offering further context regarding the study's rationale may be helpful. Italy has one of the lowest shares of individuals with basic or above-basic digital skills within the European Union (Eurostat, 2023). Given the growing importance of digital competencies in an increasingly digitized society—where such skills are essential for accessing public services and other aspects of everyday life - the promotion of digital literacy should be considered a shared priority (Gatti et al., 2017). In our study, we designed and implemented a digital literacy course that employed a specific peer-education technique not widely covered in the existing literature (Ahmad et al., 2022). Beyond delivering the course, we aimed to evaluate its impact on participants' digital skills as well as other aspects related to their quality of life. The study involved a 10-session digital literacy course attended by 40 participants of different ages. Among the objectives, we sought to assess changes in participants' smartphone usage habits. To achieve this, we asked participants to install the Stay Free – Screen Time app on their smartphones, which monitored which apps they used and for how long. In our case, the different levels of digital literacy of our participants did not play a particular role in the process of data collection, since all of them agreed to have their data monitored - all of them being volunteer and aware members of an ad hoc pilot research group. It is important to emphasize that Stay Free does not, by default or by design, collect data regarding the specific content accessed within apps or the users' social connections. The data gathered would be associated with pseudonyms and shared in aggregated categories. For example, in possible future publications, we planned to discuss social media app usage in general, rather than focusing specifically on Facebook or Instagram use, following a similar approach carried out in other studies (Caliandro et al., 2021).

However, once we submitted our study to one REC of the institutions involved in the research, along with the required materials that, as in the

[2] This is a fictitious name crafted for privacy purposes.

[3] This is of course a fictitious name employed for privacy and ethical reasons.

experience of many others, do not align well with qualitative approaches in social science (Schrag, 2011; Roth and von Unger, 2018; Van Den Hoonaard, 2019), our study was deemed too invasive after a lengthy evaluation. They asked us to significantly reduce the amount of information gathered, focusing exclusively on app categories rather than specific apps from the early phase of measurement, not just in the communication of results. This request limited the granularity of the data and the precision of the general categories. In fact, we had to rely on the categorization provided automatically by the Stay Free App, which meant we had no visibility into how these categories were created, thereby exposing the data to potential inaccuracies. Arguably, globally used apps, such as the most popular social media platforms, are likely to be classified correctly. However, more country-specific apps - which could offer more interesting and valuable insights into usage patterns - are more likely to be misclassified, significantly limiting the informative value of the gathered data. Nevertheless, in order not to delay our fieldwork further, we modified our study as suggested by the REC. After collecting informed consent from the participants, we carried out the research.

Reflecting on this experience with REC approval, it made us think about the existence of a double standard regarding the same data users generate. Consider the example of our research: on the one hand, one of our research participants visits the Facebook app and engages in several activities that are precisely monitored by Facebook—the pages they visit, the likes they give, the friends, brands, and political candidates they interact with, just to name a few categories. On the other hand, a group of researchers, through a specific app, is planning to ask the same user for consent to measure how often they use Facebook and for how long, without having any visibility whatsoever into the activities they conduct within the app. The rich data gathered by the private firm in the first case are then used for targeted advertising and other practices of value extraction. Meanwhile, the limited data gathered for research purposes is considered too invasive. While the two situations are not exactly the same - since RECs only have visibility and authority over academic research - at a general level, the standard applied to digital data in the commercial sector differs significantly from that applied to research. This disparity becomes even more evident when considering that both social media users and research participants are presented with terms of service or rules of engagement, to which they are required to give acceptance or consent in order to gain access to the platform or participate in the research. However, it is well understood that the terms of service or policies of online platforms are rarely read in full by users and are often difficult to

comprehend (Fiesler et al., 2020). In contrast, research participants—both in our study and more broadly - typically undergo a much more structured and personalized process designed to ensure they provide informed consent.

We wish to highlight - somewhat provocatively - what we see as an 'ethical paradox.' On the one hand, social researchers use digital data (typically public and limited in scope) to advance knowledge about digital society, doing so under strict and transparent ethical protocols. On the other hand, companies collect vast amounts of digital data that users 'willingly' provide, often leveraging them for purely commercial purposes - sometimes with questionable ethical consequences, such as facial recognition technologies or worker surveillance - through opaque and largely unregulated processes. Given this scenario, it appears paradoxical that, in a highly datafied society, social scientists are often regarded as the primary threat to users' privacy and are subject to oversight by ethics committees that strictly regulate their activities. In this paper, we introduce the concepts of the 'digital data double standard' and 'data donation' as, respectively, a conceptual and methodological framework to address - or at least navigate - this paradox.

In the upcoming section we describe how digital data is managed by several commercial actors that can largely benefit from the economic value they are able to extract from it under regulations that have been loose for years and in many parts of the world continue to be as such

2.1 Digital data and platforms: economic value and control

The standard applied to personal digital data by platforms strongly depends on the recent transformation of the dominant socio-economic model, which could be called surveillance capitalism. Surveillance capitalism, as described by Zuboff (2019a, 2019b), marks a shift in the nature of capitalism, where data becomes a central asset. In this system, digital platforms have blurred the lines between online and offline spheres, monitoring users' behavior through a pervasive multitude of digital devices (Mejias and Couldry, 2019; Wood and Monahan, 2019). These platforms collect and analyze data to predict, and often influence, user behavior for commercial gain (Zuboff, 2019a, 2019b; Darmody and Zwick, 2020). User data has thus become a key commodity, with some businesses even focusing primarily on trading data and data marketplaces (Spiekermann, 2019). Despite being the primary source of this valuable resource, consumers' influence has diminished (Andrejevic, 2011; Draper, 2012). Users' understandings of and opinions on these dynamics are rarely taken

into consideration by platforms. Digital companies often use or sell data for scopes which users would unlikely agree with (if fully informed in advance). Consider for example the usage of users' data to train AI systems of facial recognition (by companies like Meta or Amazon), which are seldom employed to control (and sometimes oppress) minorities (Eubanks, 2018; O'Donnell 2020; Hill and Mac, 2021). Even the rise of Web 2.0, which allows users to create and share content, largely benefits companies that exploit this user-generated information for profit, limiting the role of users (Andrejevic, 2011).

In this data-driven economy, power is concentrated in the hands of those who control and manipulate information (Arvidsson, 2016; Hintz et al., 2017; Beer, 2018). The system is characterized by a stark imbalance between those who produce data and those who profit from it (Crain, 2018). Traditional economic principles such as customer autonomy and sovereignty are increasingly undermined by the pervasive use of personal data (Darmody and Zwick, 2020). As a result, transparency and user empowerment are no longer sufficient responses to the commodification of personal information (Crain, 2018). Companies are even designing products and services specifically to gather more and more intimate and private data on consumers - consider Amazon's smart devices like Alexa that registers consumers' activities within their own households (West, 2019).

Privacy concerns are a major topic in the discussion of surveillance capitalism, with scholars emphasizing the ways in which privacy has become a kind of currency in this datafied environment (Liu, 2011; Huey, 2012; Luther and Radovic, 2012; Hulsey and Reeves, 2014; Marwick and boyd, 2018; Helm and Seubert, 2020). In the commercial sphere, platforms offer services at low or no cost to users, but the real price is the vast amount of personal data they provide in return (Hulsey and Reeves, 2014; West, 2019). Curran (2023) even argue that issues of privacy are systemic (thus not removable) in surveillance capitalism: its imperatives to datafy every aspect of social life and connect all this data with a large set of stakeholders (data brokers, data vendors, data suppliers, data analysts, developers, marketers, advertising agencies, etc.) (van der Vlist and Helmond, 2021) make the system intrinsically 'fragile' and so prone to breakdowns, data breaches, data hacking, etcetera - with obvious negative consequences for users' privacy.

Beyond privacy, the use of personal data has raised concerns about discrimination through algorithms and Big Data. Issues related to bias and unequal treatment have been documented in various areas, including employment, healthcare, mobility, and insurance, often along lines of ethnicity, gender, or disability (Winter and Ono, 2015; Janssen and Kuk,

2016; Eubanks, 2018; Favaretto et al., 2019; Tanninen, 2020; Tzanou, 2022; Charitsis and Lehtiniemi, 2023). Finally, in an admittedly dystopian fashion (Breckenridge, 2020), Zuboff comes to suggest that surveillance capitalism is bringing about a hyper-rationalization of the social order, reducing human «volition into reinforcement and action into conditioned response» (Zuboff, 2019b: 378) - this with the ultimate scope of making social behavior standard enough to be easily datafied, predicted, and controlled (Caliandro et al., 2024).

User data constitutes one of the main interests of platforms, as they can extract significant economic value from it. This focus is difficult to limit, as appropriate regulation is hard to define and slow to implement. As a result, significant risks to user data protection have emerged in recent years.

2.2 Digital data and researchers: ERC limitations but mainly limited tool

The way digital data can be used and is used in the research domain is significantly different from its use in the commercial sphere. There are two main reasons for this: the first is ethical/organizational, which has already been discussed in relation to the role of RECs, and the second is technical. Concerning the technical limitations to the use of digital data in social science research, it is important to consider that, prior to 2018, researchers could rely heavily on public APIs (Application Programming Interfaces), especially social media APIs. APIs provided valuable tools for social science research by granting access to vast amounts of publicly available user data (Lomborg and Bechmann, 2014). Researchers could collect data on user interactions, trends, and behaviors across platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, allowing the study of social dynamics, public opinion, political discourse, and cultural trends on a large scale. APIs enabled the retrieval of posts, comments, likes, and follower networks, facilitating the analysis of communication patterns, sentiment, and information dissemination (Rieder et al. 2015).

However, in 2018, the Cambridge Analytica scandal led companies to impose stringent restrictions on the use of APIs. The Cambridge Analytica scandal involved the misuse of personal data from millions of Facebook users without their consent. In 2014, Cambridge Analytica, a British political consulting firm, obtained data from users through a personality quiz app on Facebook, collecting personal information from millions of their friends as well. Cambridge Analytica used this data to build detailed psychological profiles of users, which were then employed to

influence voter behavior in political campaigns, including the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the Brexit referendum. The scandal, revealed in 2018, sparked outrage over data privacy and led to significant scrutiny of Facebook's data practices, prompting regulatory changes and legal action against both Facebook and Cambridge Analytica. Facebook, as well as other platforms, started limiting and restricting the use of APIs for allegedly protecting their users (Caliandro, 2021). This decision had a significant impact on research into digital behavior, with the limitations being termed "APIcalypse" (Bruns, 2019), and it forced researchers to reflect on conducting research "post-API" (Breuer et al., 2023; Caliandro, 2024). Scholars have pointed out that these platform-imposed restrictions, framed as privacy-enhancing measures, have primarily increased platform control, making them the only entities capable of conducting extensive analyses of digital data, which, as noted earlier, is geared toward economic value extraction (Bruns, 2019; Christner et al., 2022).

Recently, the European Union has been working to counter the growing trend of digital platforms further restricting researchers' access to relevant digital information under the guise of protecting user privacy. The recently established Digital Services Act (DSA), under Article 40, paragraph 4, states that

> upon a reasoned request from the Digital Services Coordinator of establishment, providers of very large online platforms or of very large online search engines shall, within a reasonable period, as specified in the request, provide access to data to vetted researchers who meet the requirements in paragraph 8 of this Article, for the sole purpose of conducting research that contributes to the detection, identification, and understanding of systemic risks in the Union (Official Journal of the European Union, 2022).

The requirements listed in paragraph 8 specify that, to obtain "vetted researcher" status, researchers must be affiliated with a research institution, as defined in other EU directives, be independent from commercial interests, disclose the funding of their research, manage data security accordingly, and commit to making the research results publicly available free of charge. Additionally, researchers must be investigating what the DSA defines as systemic risks. According to Article 34, these risks include the dissemination of illegal content online, any actual or foreseeable negative effects on the exercise of fundamental rights, civic discourse, electoral processes, and public security, as well as issues related to gender-based violence, the protection of public health and minors, and serious negative consequences for a person's physical and mental well-being (Joint Research Centre, 2023). However, it is still not clear how these dispositions

of the DSA for researchers will actually work (Ohme et al., 2024). Therefore, some alternatives for continuing doing research with digital data in the "post-API era" have been progressively developed.

2.2.1 Research strategies for facing technical limitations in the post-API era

After the closure of most of the social media APIs (Caliandro, 2024), few alternatives remained for researchers, and those available were less effective and more costly. One option is partnering with the platforms that generate the data, though researchers typically have limited access to the vast amounts of information available. Another option is purchasing data from third parties, such as data resellers or social media monitoring companies, which also comes with high costs and limited visibility into the data - this also comes with the risk of broadening what boyd and Crawford call the 'academic digital divide' (boyd and Crawford, 2012). As a matter of fact, corporate services providing social media data are proliferating in the last few years (see Brandwatch, Phantom Buster, Apify, etc.).

Better research options in the post API era involve the use of scraping and tracking. Scraping is an IT technique that consists in collecting data directly from the HTML code of a target web page. Through scraping one can, basically, capture everything that appears on a screen, and it can be implemented by programming an ad hoc software using Python or R (Anselmi, 2024). Usually, scraping requires high IT and programming skills, which the average social researcher usually does not possess (Caliandro et al., 2024). To overcome this specific issue, research groups have been developing their own scraping solutions, such as some of the tools by Digital Methods Initiative (DMI), led by researchers at the University of Amsterdam. Their most recent tool, 4CAT, is designed to facilitate the analysis and processing of data from online social platforms through a user-friendly web interface, eliminating the need for programming or web scraping skills. It natively supports platforms like 4chan, Telegram, and Tumblr, with the option to add additional data sources using its Python API. Another useful tool from the DMI is Zeeschuimer. It is a browser extension that monitors internet traffic while browsing social media platforms and collects data about the items seen on the web interface - (of course of the user who installed it). This tool is particularly useful for studying platforms that resist conventional web scraping and works with platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, X/Twitter, LinkedIn, and others. However, scraping is not without ethical concerns. While the practice is not inherently illegal, many social media platforms and websites strongly

oppose it, primarily because it can place significant stress on their servers. Automated scripts designed to extract entire pages often generate a high volume of server requests, creating a legitimate risk of overwhelming the servers and potentially causing site outages. Another ethical issue arises from the ability of scraping tools to bypass privacy settings, potentially accessing information that users did not intend to make public. Additionally, scraping may enable researchers and developers to collect data that platforms deliberately restrict, thereby infringing on the rights and interests of site owners. Despite these concerns, some scholars defend the use of scraping as a viable method for studying online environments (Bainotti et al., 2021; Fiesler et al., 2020).

As another option to gather digital data for research after the closure of APIs, tracking involves the use of specialized apps or software installed on participants' digital devices to monitor and record various digital activities. This method enables researchers to observe patterns of smartphone use, browsing behavior, and website navigation in real time. Tracking offers key advantages in social research, particularly by allowing access to data that would otherwise be difficult to capture, such as the frequency of smartphone access or the exact duration a user spends on specific apps. It also provides granular data, eliminating the inaccuracies common in self-reported methods like surveys or self-tracking sheets, where participants might not accurately recall their digital behaviors (Garavaglia et al., 2023).

An available software that follows the tracking approach is Screenomics. This software captures a screenshot every five seconds when a digital device is in use, providing insightful information on a wide range of digital activities, independent of the platform, software, or device being used, without requiring users' intervention (Ohme et al. 2024).

Furthermore, tracking principles and methodologies have been also applied in research that exceeded media consumption, focusing for instance on smartphone use. For instance, Garavaglia and colleagues (2023) installed RescueTime on research participants' smartphones which was able to record which apps/websites participants accessed, when and for how long, providing very granular and relevant information on the usage patterns of this kind of technology.

Despite their advantages compared to the other post-API data gathering strategies that require collaboration with digital platforms or purchasing data from third parties, these two approaches still have technical and methodological limitations. For instance, with respect to scraping, the different policies of websites and platforms still limit the amount of data that can be downloaded (Christner et al., 2022; Breuer et al., 2023).

Concerning the tracking approach Ohme and colleagues (2024) pointed out how establishing proper and rigorous research based on tracking «requires substantial expertise and effort. Researchers must develop or obtain the tracking software, recruit and consent the participants, and manage what are often very large data sets in accordance with strict privacy-preserving protocols» (p. 139). Furthermore, ethical issues persist, including the previously discussed concerns related to scraping: the potential excessive burden of requests placed on website servers, the collection of data that users may not wish to share, the possible violation of platform policies, and the risk of accessing data considered personal through tracking.

Several contributions have advocated for greater involvement of users in data collection as an additional strategy to address these ethical concerns, while also tackling the technical challenges associated with conducting research on digital data (Christner et al., 2022; Breuer et al., 2023; Caliandro, 2024). The approach of data donation aligns with this perspective.

3. THE OPPORTUNITIES OF DATA DONATION

Scholars reflecting on the concept of data donation recognize that current academic interest in digital data is limited by legal, ethical, and technical issues, which challenge the opportunities that could arise from studying such materials (Araujo et al., 2022; Ohme and Araujo, 2022). Data donation can be understood as the «user-centric approach in which research participants donate their existing digital trace data to researchers» (Ohme et al., 2024: 128). There are several practical approaches to implementing data donation. For example, users can record their online activities through specific plug-ins or tools like the previously described Zeeschuimer. Alternatively, users can donate the usage reports that are automatically generated by most smartphones each week. Furthermore, leveraging Article 15 of the EU's 2018 General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), users can download a copy of their personal data from platforms like Facebook and X (formerly Twitter), called Data Download Package (DDP), and donate it to researchers (Boeschoten et al., 2022; Ohme et al., 2024).

These strategies offer several advantages from a research perspective. First, the information gathered is richer than what could be obtained through alternative methods, including those previously described. Data provided through data donation is even more detailed than the information once available through APIs before their widespread closure. Additionally, data donation directly involves participants, requiring their

informed consent due to the active role they play in the process. This ensures that users can choose which data to donate and which to keep private (Ohme et al., 2024). To take advantage of these benefits, scholars have developed software tools for data donation, such as Port, which also focuses on user control and selection of specific data for donation. Port requires participants to request a digital copy of their personal data from platforms like Facebook, Instagram, or Google Search in the form of DDP, which platforms are legally obligated to provide under GDPR. After receiving their DDP, participants save it to their personal device, where only the relevant data points for the research are locally processed and extracted. Participants review the extracted data, and if they agree, they consent to donate it. Only after this consent is given, the data is sent to a designated storage location, where it becomes accessible to researchers for analysis (Boeschoten et al., 2023).

Another tool is the Open-Source Data Donation Framework (OSD2F). OSD2F provides a web-based interface where participants can follow step-by-step instructions for downloading their data from selected platforms, view their DDP contents, select which data to share or exclude, and then donate the chosen data to a specific research project. In the background, OSD2F performs pre-processing steps to minimize the data before it is made available to researchers (Araujo et al., 2022).

In conclusion, we can argue that, even if post-API research techniques, such as tracking or scraping may raise ethical concerns with respect to the gathered data, they turn out to be respectful of users' privacy when they are compliant with the protocol of data donation. In fact, participants are asked to sign an informed consent, autonomously collect data from their own digital devices and then submit them to the research team. On top of that, consider that each participant can freely decide not to donate her data, even though she already downloaded it as well as previously signed an informed consent and agreed to its conditions. As demonstrated in Port's or OSD2F's workflow, users are directly involved in downloading their personal data. If they feel uncomfortable donating data from a particular platform, they can simply choose not to do so. Additionally, a data-minimization approach can be applied, where researchers help participants extract only the data necessary for the research, excluding irrelevant information from the dataset to be analyzed (Ohme and Araujo, 2022). Furthermore, at the crossroads of advantage for researchers and participants, data donation methods offer the chance to ensure that participants are aware of how their data is going to be used and expressed actually informed consent due to previous chances of confronting with the research team, as well as the option of exclude some data from the

analysis as previously mentioned. In this way a user-centric approach to the research is fully leveraged (Ohme et al., 2024).

Despite its significant advantages from both research and ethical standpoints, data donation has some limitations, as pointed out by Ohme and colleagues (2024). One major issue is the limited sample size. Since data donation requires direct participant involvement, it is unlikely that a research project would engage a very large number of users, thus reducing the amount of available data. While APIs once provided vast datasets that enabled big data analysis, data donation is better suited for more nuanced projects involving qualitative approaches. Another technical limitation, though arguably less significant, is that the data gathered through donation is less structured than the data previously available through APIs, which were more organized and ready for cleaning and analysis in a big data context. Additionally, the digital skills required to download personal data may present a barrier for some participants. For instance, older adults with limited digital skills may find the process of downloading DDPs challenging (Pizzul et al., 2024). However, this issue can be mitigated through active collaboration between researchers and participants from the early stages of data collection (Kmetty and Németh, 2022; van Driel et al., 2022). For example, it is possible to organize sessions in which researchers assist participants throughout the different steps of the data donation process (Pizzul et al., 2024) and/or provide them with ad hoc video tutorials featuring instructions for collecting and storing data from their own devices (Punziano et al., 2024). In addition to the limitations related to those who are technically able to donate data, there is a further constraint concerning individuals' willingness to participate in data donation (Gomez Ortega et al., 2023). This is also connected to participants' ability to choose which data to donate or withhold, as previously discussed. As a result, there is a potential risk of self-selection bias among participants. Nevertheless, in line with the ethnographic principles underpinning the most recent evolution of digital methods - specifically the addition of the "follow the users" approach (Caliandro, 2024) - if a user chooses not to be followed, this decision must be respected. This dynamic, in different forms, also occurs in more traditional research methods, where individuals may decline to participate in an interview or refuse to complete a survey. Furthermore, the issue of working with partial and poorly comparable data is primarily a concern within quantitative research—particularly when the aim is to make comparisons between individual users or identify correlations between variables to produce generalizable results. The situation is quite different in qualitative research, which often focuses on providing broader descriptions of digital

communication processes. For example, Caliandro et al. (2021, p. 11) used participants' smartphone log data "as signals to orient further qualitative explorations"; since the log data indicated heavy use of WhatsApp, they focused their face-to-face interviews on participants' everyday practices with the app.

Lastly, research projects based on data donation do not allow (or at least make it hard) to implement those 'classical' digital methods analysis (relying on APIs) aimed at mapping entire platforms or large portions of them (Marres, 2015). These kinds of studies have been crucial to cast a light upon and raise academic and public awareness about the so called 'information disorders' (i.e., fake news, conspiracy theories, hate speech, etc.) (Rogers, 2023) - and especially on the scale of their circulation and diffusion. As a matter of fact, research on information disorders not only contributed in developing 'societal defenses' (see the proliferation of digital literacy, debunking and fact-checking initiatives), but also forced platforms to take serious steps to contrast such phenomena (Matamoros-Fernandez et al., 2021). Of course, future research will continue to investigate fake news, but (probably) the focus of the investigation will shift more toward the consumption of problematic content, rather than their global diffusion.

4. CONCLUSION

The influence of RECs has been widely criticized in social science, particularly by those employing qualitative approaches. Critics argue that these bodies are often guided by criteria, paradigms, and approaches suited for biological and medical disciplines, which are difficult to transfer to the social science domain (Bosk, 2007; Schrag, 2011; Roth and von Unger, 2018; Van Den Hoonaard, 2019; Brown, 2023). Ethical issues, and thus the role of RECs, become even more problematic when digital data is involved, as traditional, non-digital principles do not fully apply to the management and handling of digital data (Caliandro, 2021). While this issue has been extensively discussed, particularly by those interested in digital methods (Caliandro and Gandini, 2017; Caliandro et al., 2024), the intersection between digital data and RECs evaluation has not been widely explored. To address this gap, we refer to a practical example from our own research on digital literacy and required empirical adjustments by the competent REC to reduce what were perceived as potential privacy violations. Starting with this example, we reflected on the double standard that characterizes private and academic interests regarding user data.

In the private sector, driven by platforms following the surveillance capitalism model, user data is extensively analyzed for economic value extraction with limited boundaries despite a growing interest in data protection. In contrast, technical limitations imposed by these same platforms with closure of APIs, combined with ethical restrictions required by RECs, significantly reduce the potential activities of researchers dealing with digital data.

Therefore, following the closure of APIs, another layer of restrictions seems to be imposed on social researchers: that of RECs. This introduces the notion of a "digital data double closure," in addition to the "digital data double standard." It seems quite paradoxical that social researchers—who are generally well-trained in ethical matters and whose primary goal in collecting social data is to enhance social knowledge (Mertens and Ginsberg, 2009; ESRC, 2022)—are increasingly restricted in their access to data, while digital platforms, whose main objective is economic profit, face virtually less limitations on the quantity and quality of data they can collect from citizens, nor on their ability to sell this data to third parties (Reviglio, 2022).

To overcome some of the limitations set by this double standard and to ease the double closure, recognizing the importance of ethical evaluations in scientific research, including in the social sciences, we do not promote reducing the role of RECs. It is important to emphasize once again that the arguments we have been developing are in no way opposed to the existence of ethics committees, nor are we suggesting their ineffectiveness or advocating for their abolition. On the contrary, we believe in the need to strengthen them by promoting the establishment of more discipline-specific or ad hoc committees that are better equipped to address the specific needs of various fields, or at least by ensuring diverse expertise and sensibilities within the same REC. On the one hand, such committees should be more attuned to and knowledgeable about the unique principles, dynamics, and professional ethics that govern social research, which often differ from those in biomedical or natural sciences. On the other hand, they should be aware of the pervasive logic of surveillance capitalism and the significant power asymmetries embedded within it, which can shape research outcomes due to the current limited access to data provided by platforms following the closure of APIs. Strengthening ethics committees in this way would ensure that they do not contribute to further restricting the study of digital data beyond the limitations already imposed by private platforms. Moreover, it would help address the double standard we have been describing, by not further limiting the use of digital data for collective knowledge generation compared to the one for

private economic value extraction. In this way, Research Ethics Committees (RECs) could play a more active role in the social science research process involving digital data—research that often seeks to challenge the power dynamics of digital platforms, whose practices are frequently far from ethical. Greater involvement from RECs is fully aligned with the data donation strategy we have described, which emphasizes the active role of users in controlling their personal data. Beyond addressing some of the limitations inherent in post-API research (Araujo et al., 2022; Boeschoten et al., 2022; Ohme and Araujo, 2022), data donation also serves as a valuable method for fostering participant engagement with their personal digital data in a more participatory, informed, and empowered manner, consistent with the principles of digital methods (Halavais, 2021; Caliandro, 2024). In this co-constructed approach to research on digital data—grounded in collaboration between researchers and participants—RECs that adopt more discipline-specific sensitivities and perspectives could find a renewed role. They could further support the development of research projects and help address the growing obstacles to knowledge production posed by the increasing inaccessibility of digital environments, a restriction driven by platforms seeking to consolidate power and control.

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