



center for
social media, tech
and democracy

ministry of
digital affairs

Fact sheet

Access Denied: When Tech Giants are the Gatekeepers for Researchers' Access to Data

In 2023, more than nine out of ten Danes used social media such as Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn or X. The more time we spend online, the more data we hand over to the platforms we use. While the tech giants, on the one hand, have almost unlimited access to data about their users and therefore in-depth knowledge about Danes, we as a society generally have limited knowledge about the extent and use of the information and data held by these companies. Access to this data is crucial to understand digital life and its impact on society.

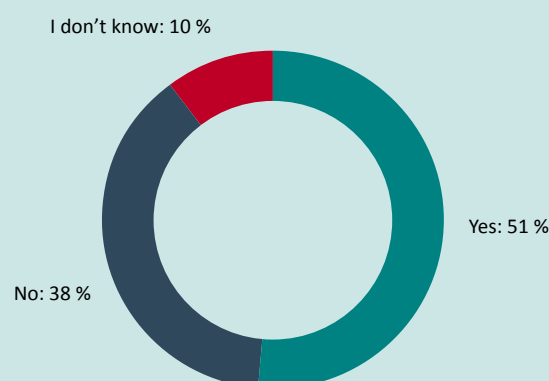
Center for Social Media, Tech and Democracy has taken the temperature of Danish research environments' access to data from tech giants on the eve of new European rules on data access taking effect.

X and Facebook are both the most frequently researched platforms and the most avoided platforms.

- Almost half of the researchers surveyed have previously used data from X (49 pct.) and Facebook (46 pct.), respectively.
- Half of the researchers surveyed (51 pct.) have avoided specific platforms of the tech giants in their research because they have been unable to access data from the platform or search engine.
- Among the researchers who have avoided specific tech giant platforms in their research, 65 pct. have avoided using data from Facebook, 53 pct. have avoided X, and 36 pct. have avoided Instagram.

Figure 1

Have you avoided specific, very large online platforms or search engines in your research because you couldn't access data from the platform/search engine?



Note: n = 222

Source: Center for Social Media, Tech and Democracy, 2024

One in three have had to redesign a research project due to data access challenges.

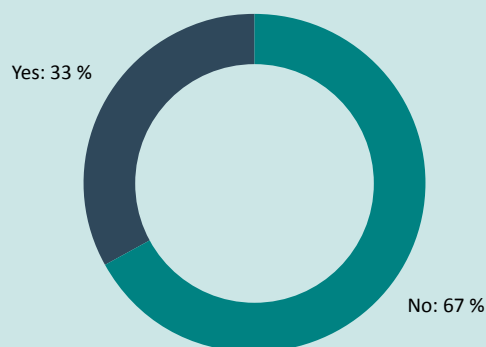
- 51 pct. have experienced a change in data access during the research project.
- 46 pct. have experienced not being able to access the data they initially expected.
- 43 pct. have experienced uncertainty about whether the research project violated the platform's or search engine's terms of service.

Tech giants' terms of service stand in the way of research.

- More than two in five (44 pct.) of the researchers surveyed say there are methods of data collection and research designs they avoid because they are concerned about not complying with the tech giants' terms of service.

Figure 2

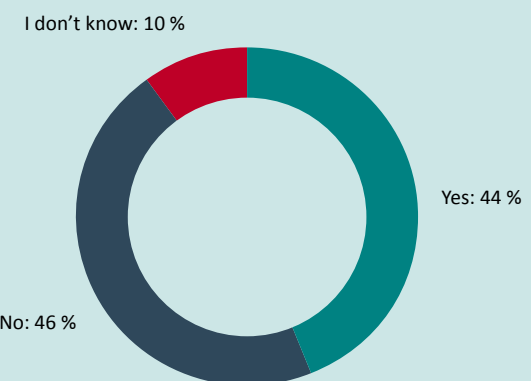
Have you ever had to redesign a research project due to challenges in accessing data?



Note: n = 222
Source: Center for Social Media, Tech and Democracy, 2024

Figure 3

Have you avoided methods of data collection or survey designs because you were worried about not complying with a very large online platform or search engine's terms of service?



Note: n = 222
Source: Center for Social Media, Tech and Democracy, 2024

Quote: About tech giants setting conditions for data access



Tech giants can restrict both access to and use of data, for example, by setting conditions on how data can be used. In practice, these conditions can be difficult for researchers to fulfil. Allowing tech giants to control research in this manner can significantly compromise the freedom of research. The freedom of research also suffers if tech giants have a say in which researchers and research teams can access data.

Setting up different conditions for researchers' access to data can ultimately mean that research into data from tech giants risks being done at the tech giants' terms and mercy.

– Anja Bechmann, Professor and Head of DATALAB, Aarhus University