

What does TikTok know about you?

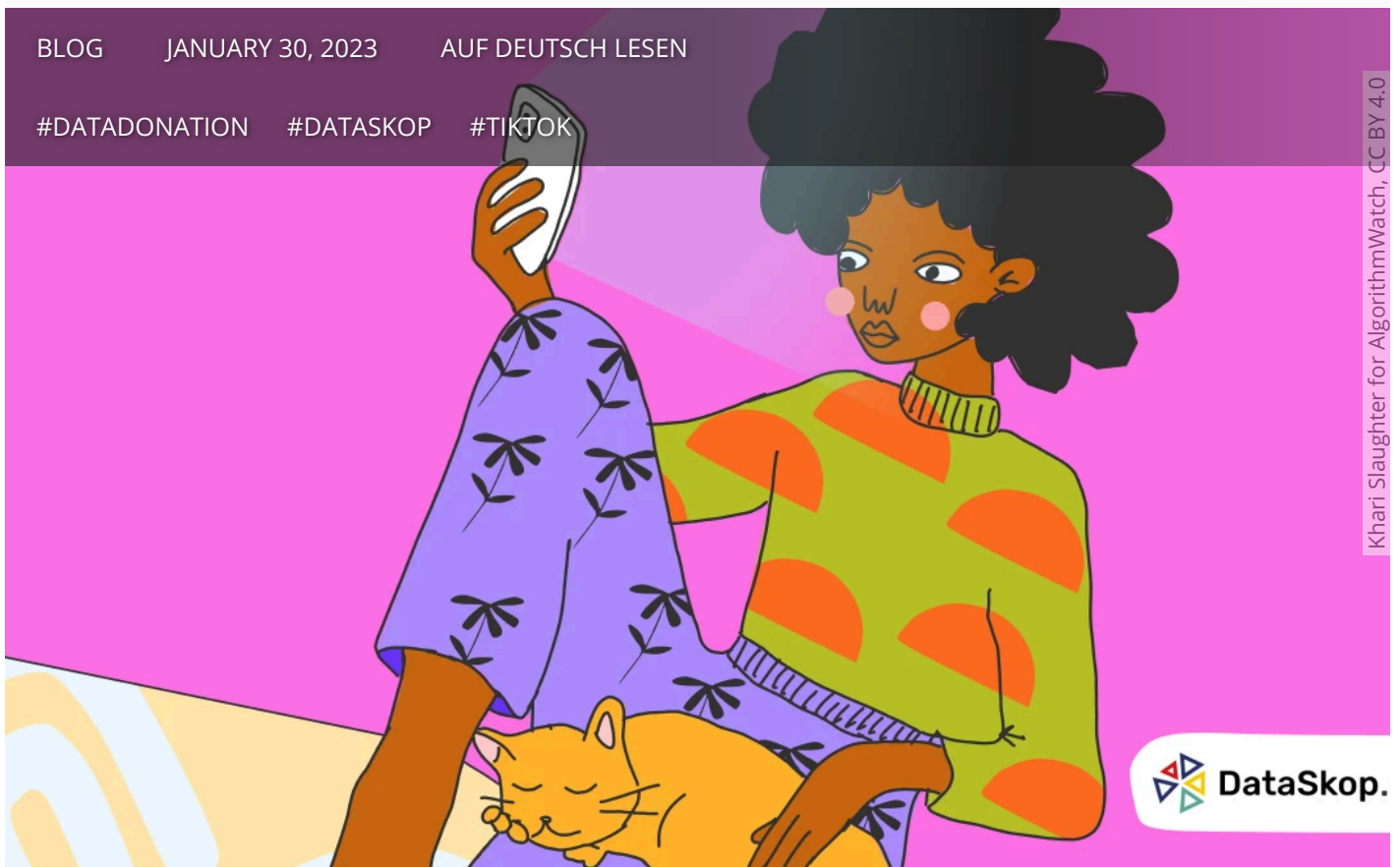
Data donations deliver answers!

by Melis Omalar

Companies like Facebook, Instagram, Google, and TikTok often know about the harmful effects of their algorithmic systems and yet continue to prevent independent research on them. Data donations like DataSkop are one of the few ways to investigate opaque algorithms.

BLOG JANUARY 30, 2023 AUF DEUTSCH LESEN

#DATADONATION #DATASKOP #TIKTOK



Data donations can help us make sense of the algorithms of algorithmic recommender system of social media platforms. In autumn 2021, we conducted the six-week pilot project "Election recommendation: What does the YouTube algorithm show you about the Bundestag election?". In our second DataSkop campaign, we take a closer look at the social media giant TikTok.

What data does TikTok store about me?

TikTok collects quite a lot of data about us. The [company's privacy policy](#) reveals what the app can access: names, age, phone numbers, email addresses, details of devices and

mobile networks used, keystrokes, videos and texts, comments, private messages, and even biometric data from photos of faces and voice recordings.

The TikTok algorithm also tracks what we watch and how much time we spend on each video. This way, the app knows a lot about our behavior patterns, interests, and dislikes. [TikTok claims](#) to use this information to better tailor content to its users.

“TikTok creates extensive profiles of its users. That's why many people feel like they are getting video recommendations that are a good fit. With this personal data, such as interests and preferences, TikTok has power over us. With DataSkop, we want to show how TikTok uses this power,” says Johannes Filter from AlgorithmWatch, developer of the DataSkop software.

While we users are an open book to TikTok, we hardly know anything about how the platform works.

What does TikTok do with my data?

In recent years, the security of the TikTok app has been questioned time and again. There have been several reports of [hackers having accessed uploaded videos](#) and obtain personal data. In addition, TikTok is suspected of being [linked to the Chinese government](#). As if by chance, videos that disseminate content critical of the regime are repeatedly deleted by the moderation algorithms. TikTok denies claims that they are vulnerable to Chinese influence. But for us users, it remains unclear who has access to our personal data and how it is handled.



TikTok must make its actions and algorithmic decisions on the platform more transparent for us. But TikTok and other Big Tech giants aren't doing so in Germany—legal regulations promising greater transparency have been announced, but haven't yet come into effect. That's why, with your help, we are working proactively to make sense of TikTok's recommendation algorithms.

How does TikTok's 'For You' feed work?

On social media platforms, fake news, and hate speech spread content that divides our society. This is especially true for TikTok. The platform has become one of the most influential in the world. More than a billion people use the app. TikTok's success has even led competitors from Instagram and YouTube to copy features.

We have a legitimate interest in gaining access to platform data, as features like the 'For You' feed can pose risks to our society and democracy. This is a necessary condition for holding the tech giants that run these platforms accountable.

The impact of TikTok has not been sufficiently studied because the company denies access to research institutions like us. We also know little about the automated decision-making systems that determine what we see.

In our DataSkop alliance of researchers, media educators, software developers, and journalists, we want to analyze your donated data so that together we can understand how TikTok trends and niches emerge and, most importantly, why.



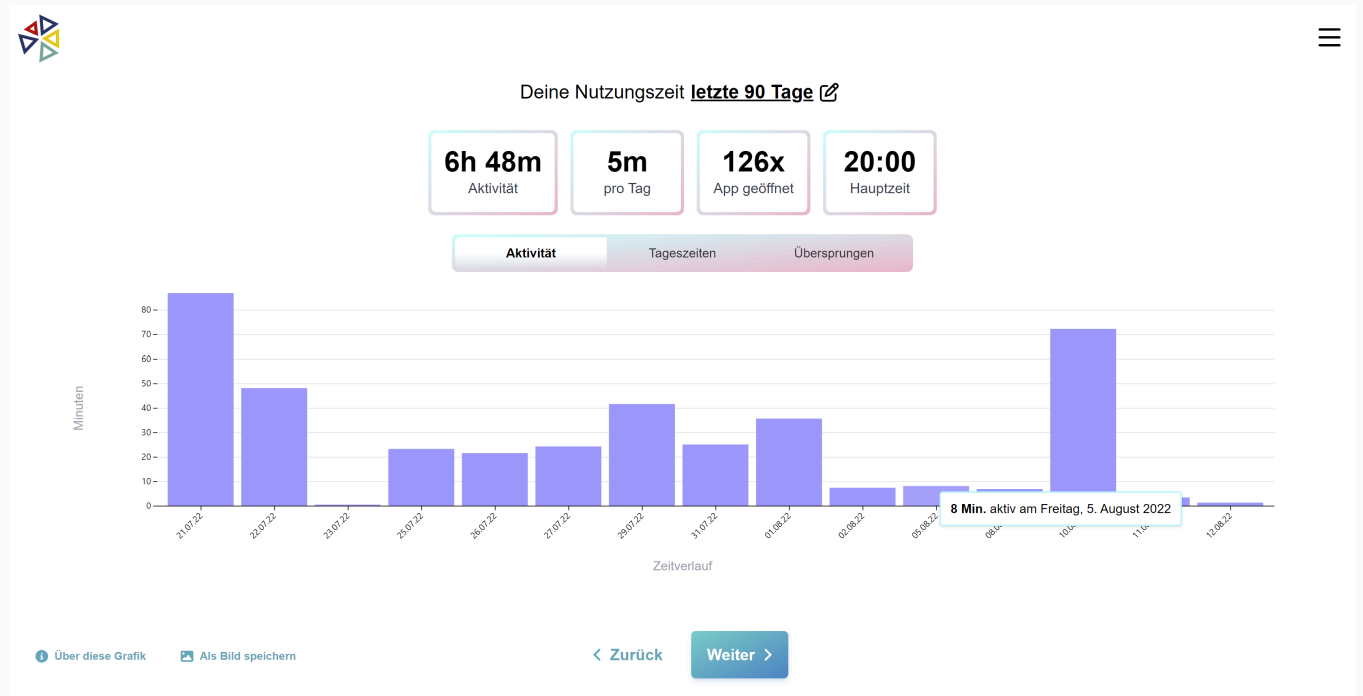
With the help of your donated usage data, we can investigate how, for example, the climate crisis and rising food prices were only an issue in TikTok niches.

How does data donation work?

You can [download the DataSkop app](#) for free. Your GDPR data is then automatically requested from TikTok. This is your private usage data that TikTok must give out due to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) if users request it.

As soon as TikTok provides your data (this usually takes three to four days), DataSkop notifies you. You can then analyze your data with the help of a visualization and learn

more about your own usage behavior on TikTok.



This is an overview of app usage over the last 90 days, including activity per day and your peak usage hour.

Now you can decide if you want to [donate your data](#) to us confidentially so that we can store it in our database. With your donation, you would support us significantly in the scientific task of investigating the functioning of TikTok. We pseudonymize your data and make sure that it is secure. Your data donation is entirely voluntary.

The screen displays a question with a heart icon: 'Möchtest du deine Daten spenden?'. Below the question is explanatory text about data pseudonymization and control. At the bottom are 'Zurück' and 'Ja/Nein' buttons.

Möchtest du deine Daten spenden?

Deine Daten werden pseudonymisiert und ausschließlich mit DataSkop-Partnern geteilt. Sie helfen uns, TikTok besser zu verstehen. Du behältst nach der Spende die Kontrolle über deine Daten und kannst sie jederzeit löschen.

[Zurück](#)

Do you want to donate your data? This step is entirely voluntary and helps us all understand TikTok better.

At the end of the campaign, our team of experts will analyze all the donated data, and we will share the results with the public. Of course, you will be among the first to know about

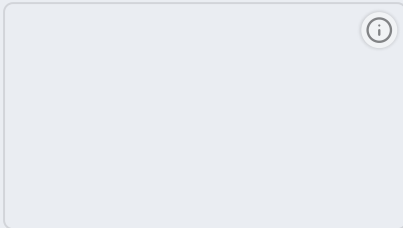
it.

Our team makes sure that your donation is not traced back to you personally. Read more about our [privacy policy at DataSkop](#).

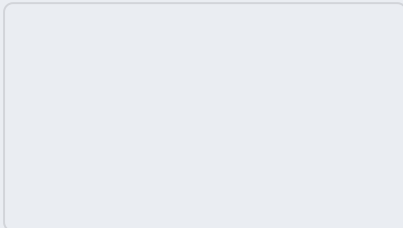
Join us by sharing DataSkop in your network!

Please [donate your data](#) now. And remember, the more data donated, the more we can find out about TikTok. To help us do that, you can [share the campaign now](#) to raise awareness with us.

READ MORE

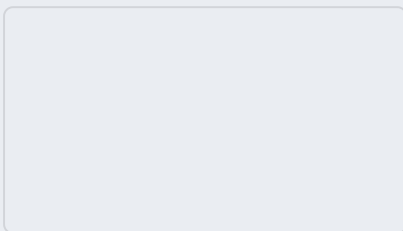


Learn more about DataSkop



BLOG

DataSkop: Investigating YouTube's algorithm during Germany's election campaign



BLOG

DataSkop: simulating the dynamics of recommender systems