

Participation as a Condition of Access: Platform Infrastructures and the Origins of Data Extraction

Jooyeol Kim
Independent Researcher

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Short Abstract

Digital platforms do not merely extract data from users. They structure access conditions that format participation and generate behavioral traces. This paper examines how platform infrastructures organize participation as a condition of access, shaping the origins of data extraction.

Long Abstract

Participation in platform environments is often a condition of access rather than a voluntary act of data sharing. Data extraction therefore begins not with data collection but with the infrastructural organization of access to digital services. In this sense, platforms do not merely extract data from users; they organize the conditions under which users become data-generating participants. Platforms shape the cognitive circumstances under which users encounter services, make decisions, and generate machine-readable behavioral traces.

This paper examines how platform infrastructures organize participation in ways that produce data as a by-product of access. Many digital services operate through all-or-nothing consent regimes in which refusing to provide personal data results in severely restricted functionality. Discourses of user resistance often underestimate the infrastructural asymmetry between platforms and individual users, as attempts to evade data capture may trigger automated moderation systems or account exclusion. In contexts such as digital lending platforms, individuals may disclose extensive personal data in exchange for immediate economic access.

Taken together, these mechanisms suggest that data extraction operates less through voluntary sharing than through structured dependence on platform infrastructures. Participation becomes formatted through access conditions, producing behavioral traces captured as data.

Understanding platform power therefore requires examining the access architectures that precede and shape the generation of behavioral data. By foregrounding participation as a condition of access, this paper shifts attention from data collection to the infrastructural conditions that make participation—and therefore data generation—possible. This perspective raises questions about designing digital services less dependent on data-generating participation.

Note: This is an accepted conference abstract record, not a full paper.