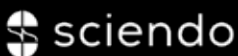


Overview, immediacy, control and knowing the audiences – value propositions and their failure in Google Analytics Dashboard



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ABSTRACT

This study scrutinises web analytics, specifically Google Analytics, in its capacity to support content creators in understanding user behaviour and improving digital communication. Google, with its different versions of web analytics software, is dominating the market in collecting and analysing web traffic statistics, and has thus become a central part of how digital environments can know their users. We use the concepts of transcoding culture and social imaginaries to show the importance of scrutinising the value propositions ingrained within the web analytics dashboard. Despite the excitement and fear related to Google knowing too much about the people behind the screens, the analysis shows that Google Analytics 4 struggles to provide a comprehensive understanding of audiences. Focusing on the four value propositions – overview, immediacy, control, and knowing the audience – we argue that Google Analytics overstates its understanding of audiences. It is in the interest of Google to hyperbolise knowledge about the audience, even with potential privacy concerns, as it supports the social imaginary of an all-knowing digital platform. Thus, a critical and nuanced approach to web analytics, considering their impact on society and privacy concerns, is needed to balance the discussions.

KEYWORDS: Audience research, Google Analytics, social imaginaries, transcoding audiences

INTRODUCTION

All digital spaces rely heavily on web analytics – collecting, analysing, and reporting data generated by users visiting and interacting with the website. In different contexts, web analytics represents both the process of analysis and the outcome of such an analysis. The key claim is that these analytics answer important questions about the people visiting your online

space and supposedly ensure that the website resonates with the target audience. Web analytics are supposed to offer powerful insights about the people who receive your messages.

The basic premise of communication is that there is a sender, a message, a channel for sending the message, and a receiver (Lasswell 1948). Since the emergence of broadcast media, the sender has limited

or no contact with the receiver and does not have many insights about the potential impact of the message. Within the professional journalism sector, the approach has also included distancing the journalistic values from the audiences' desires. However, with the digitalisation processes, the audience metrics are strongly interrupting the distancing in journalism, and audiences, at least rhetorically, have an increasingly stronger position within the newsrooms. As public communication has increasingly moved out of the professional journalistic context and into professions such as public relations, marketers, and communications officers who are making their own digital media products, the question of the receiver or audience within the digital media realm is part of the daily work practices of a much larger professional community.

The diverse professional group of communicators who rely on web analytics for audience metrics ranges from website makers, whose technical positions require increasing knowledge of coding languages, to content specialists, who, thanks to the contemporary interfaces, need little or no knowledge about how digital media generates audience metrics. These diverse groups rely on web analytics, pre-processing, and visualisations performed on dashboards where the data are framed into supposedly actionable insights. Web servers collect basic website traffic statistics, and there are numerous ways in which these statistics can be made available to professional communicators. Numerous companies provide this service, but today Google has the largest share in assisting website makers in collecting and analysing traffic statistics.

The outcomes of website traffic data collection and analysis are reported on the dashboards. In Few's (2006: 26) classic definition, a dashboard is a "[v]isual display of the most information needed to achieve one or more objectives which fit entirely on a single computer screen so it can be monitored at a glance." More recently, Pettit and Leao (2017: 2) defined dashboards as

"graphic user interfaces that comprise a combination of information and geographical visualization methods for creating metrics, benchmarks, and indicators to assist in monitoring and decision-making." Dashboards can be data portals for individuals, public or commercial organisations, providing visualised, interactive access to "big data" in which people in private or professional capacities can monitor their finances, health, projects and other aspects of their personal and institutional lives (Sorapure 2023).

In this study, we focus on Google Analytics 4 (GA4) dashboards that mediate web traffic data to professional users as a way to understand their audiences. We look at the dashboard as a place where the messy reality of audience experiences has been transcoded into the computer code and displayed. We argue that with Google's prominent position in the analytics market, understanding the promises and assumptions within their analytics dashboard helps us to interrogate how audiences are part of the website and digital content creation experiences.

We conducted a semiotic analysis of the analytics dashboards and explored the related environment of instructional pages, videos, and tutorials to uncover imaginaries related to audiences. While the surface-level argument claims that GA4 is able to give ever better insights about the audience, the discontinuation of third-party cookies and change in user-tracking possibilities means that Google will often have to operate with even less data about the audience than in the past. The related environment of instructional pages, videos, and tutorials demonstrates a diverse ecosystem of actors who capitalise on Google's data collection practices and, in return, support the imaginary of all-knowing-all-powerful insights with their promotional materials directed towards communication practitioners.

First, we briefly introduce how Google Analytics 4 works and how it knows what it does regarding user behaviour. We then briefly discuss the ideas of transcoding

social imaginaries as an analytical tool to unpack the role of Google Analytics in digitally mediated communication. We approach GA4's social imaginary by looking at how it constructs audiences, that is, both the specialists who use it and the people whose habits are ostensibly tracked. As such, we provide insights into critical data studies, as well as a closer understanding of audience analytics in professional contexts.

In their version, GA4 provides an extremely useful service that can provide a quick overview that is customisable to the needs of the people working with this data, providing detailed and actionable information in real time. This resonates with the discussions of a surveillance society in which people have given up on any hope for privacy in return for digital services. However, our analysis indicates that even if Google as a company might know the users digitally created content across multiple services, the Google Analytics service provided for communication and web professionals provides only a very limited understanding of the audience (collective or individual) behind the screen.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT GOOGLE ANALYTICS?

Google Analytics is the general name for the Google service providing web analytics for its customers. Google Analytics 4 (GA4) replaces the previous version of Universal Analytics (UA). UA recognised users primarily through the use of cookies and client IDs. When a user visited a website with the Google Analytics tracking code installed, a first-party cookie was typically set in the user's browser. This cookie contained a unique identifier called the client ID, which served as a persistent identifier for the user across multiple sessions and interactions with the website. In addition to the client ID, UA also used session cookies to track individual user sessions. While UA primarily relied on cookies for user recognition, it did not directly support cross-device tracking. Thus, as a user interacted with a website from multiple devices or browsers, they

were assigned different client IDs for each device or browser, leading to fragmentation of user data.

Around the turn of this decade, growing awareness among users about online privacy and data-tracking practices has led to increased concerns regarding the use of cookies to track user behaviour across websites and devices. This led to the introduction of the GDPR in Europe in 2018, which required explicit consent from EU users to use the cookies. California Consumer Privacy Act, enacted in 2020, requires businesses to disclose their data collection practices and provide opt-out mechanisms for consumers. Major browsers began implementing stricter privacy controls; for example, Safari and Firefox now block third-party cookies by default. Chrome announced that it would do the same by the end of 2024 ('Third-Party Cookies Restricted by Default for 1% of Chrome Users' n.d.). Many users are trying to opt out of cookie-based tracking by using browser extensions to block cookies altogether. These developments signalled the end of effective cookie-focused web analytics.

Google has had to rethink its user data and analytics collection to be GDPR compliant and find ways to account for data losses in filtering programs, NoScript packages, and privacy-preservation approaches. Developing a new way of collecting and tracking digital actions that use a Google user ID, benefits of the Google-owned Chrome browser (having about two-thirds of the market share, Statcounter, 2024), the new analytics system is compensating for significant data losses while claiming to be able to do better thanks to AI technologies that are supposed to cover the gaps in data with predictive computations. GA4 still utilises first-party cookies to store a client ID for each user, when possible, but when it is not, GA4 has introduced – in response to privacy legislations and emerging privacy issues--alternative methods for user tracking and recognition. In addition to cookies, GA4 can use device identifiers (for example, Apple's Identifier for Advertisers (IDFA) on

iOS devices or Google's Advertising ID (GAID) on Android devices) to associate user interactions with unique user profiles ('[GA4] Data Collection – Analytics Help' n.d.). GA4 allows businesses to associate user interactions with authenticated user accounts. When users log into a website or app, they can be assigned a user ID, which is passed to GA4 along with their interactions (clicks, scrolls, etc.). This enables a more accurate cross-device and cross-platform tracking. GA4 can also use IP address tracking as an additional user recognition method. Although not as reliable as a cookie, it can still provide additional information about behaviour, geographic location, and session activity. GA4 can use browser- and device-type information to identify and track users across sessions and devices.

By diversifying user recognition and tracking, GA4 can manoeuvre around various privacy legislations worldwide. Simultaneously, user recognition becomes a hazier, combinatory task, where the user identity is combined from various traces that may or may not belong to the same user. The user is, so to speak, recognised as a pattern rather than from the actual traces it leaves of its actions: it is more of a chimaera than a recognised user. GA4 operates with what Kitchin (2014: 59) calls 'exhaust', data that is a by-product, auto-generated metadata, and as such, is not designed to answer any specific questions.

A whole ecosystem of additional service providers, including trainers, marketers, consultants, advisors, and companies that use Google's data but display it on dashboards of their own design, have become active in the field. In this ecosystem, the move from UA to GA4 has become a constructive disruption that allows for a fruitful investigation of the promises and expectations of the new audience analytics dashboards.

TRANSCODING THE SOCIAL IMAGINARY

Data visualisations and dashboards of various kinds for tracking people's socio-cultural behaviours on the web are chang-

ing the social imaginary. Lev Manovich (2020), for example, makes a case for a new type of cultural analysis, which he calls *cultural analytics*, by which he means "the use of computational and design methods – including data visualization, media and interaction design, statistics, and machine learning – for exploration and analysis of contemporary culture at scale" (13). For him, cultural analysis has always been impeded for historical, technical, and ideological reasons, by focusing on too few exemplars. His initial inspiration and model for the idea of cultural analytics is the first Google Analytics launched in October 2005 (2020:31). Here, Manovich follows his earlier insight of computerisation affecting "deeper and deeper layers of culture" (2001: 27), where new media is characterized by five principles: numerical representation, that is, "subject to algorithmic manipulation" (27); modularity ("images, sounds, shapes, or behaviours are represented as collections of discrete samples (pixels, polygons, voxels, characters, scripts)") (30); automation ("human intentionality can be removed from the creative process, at least in part" (32); variability (new media objects "can exist in different, potentially infinite versions" (36) and, most importantly for this paper, transcoding ("cultural categories and concepts are substituted on the level of meaning and/or language, by new ones that derive from the computer's ontology, epistemology, and pragmatics" (47). We argue that this is also how Google Analytics is transforming the ontology, epistemology, and practice of culture; as a data visual "computer layer" gliding into the sociocultural imaginary, producing ways of apprehending what is relevant to know about the word as it exists.

The principles delineated above can be discerned in GA4. GA4 is fundamentally based on a numerical representation of the world: it counts and categorises digital interactions. It is modular and similar to all computer visualisations. More importantly, although it allows users to define what to quantify (from very limited, digitally operationalizable options), the quantifica-

tion and visualisation of the quantifications themselves are automatised. The variability of GA4 objects is limited by technical, practical, and legal constraints, but these constraints are not immutable. However, as Athique (2018) argues that the practices of making routine assumptions about human behaviours on the basis of numerical trends is akin to numerology.

GA4 listens to the world of the internet. The ontology of this world consists, first of all, of what we might call “landscape features,” a kind of background in which actions can take place. The Internet landscape contains items such as language, screen resolution, page location, page title, and where used came from. Or in GA4/English transcoded language: *language*, page location, page referrer, page title, and screen resolution. Furthermore, it consists of actions such as downloading a file, submitting a form, loading a page, playing a video, and completing a purchase. Again, in GA4/English: file download, form submit, pageview, video complete, and in app_purchase. (Underneath the GA4/English lies, of course, the binary code.) It is perhaps noteworthy that in this ontology, there are no actors, actants, or agents performing the action. There are simply landscape features and actions, and even this distinction is relatively problematic. Sometimes, language, for example, can be an action (chosen as an action captured by GA4); sometimes, it can be just the default background in the prehistory of app programming. We might say that everything GA4 listens to and can detect are semiotic actions, recordable things that stand for something in the GA4 ontology. The job of GA4 is to transcode these actions into humanly (or marketing) meaningful actions. Thus, the distinction between “passive” landscape and “active” action is already transcoding to our non-machine ontology. Ultimately, both are detectable things that the GA4 archives.

Quantifications, systems of categorisation, and visualisations are semiotic transcodings performed using GA4. With the help of instruction manuals, tips, and explanations of meanings, quantifications,

and visualisations tether the world of digital actions to human actions, conducting translations, as explained by Bolin and Andersson Swartz (2015). We can now reconstruct the GA4 detected actions as user actions and combine them into a chimaera of patterns of behaviour, traits, and proclivities, which can be nudged by website design choices. In our analysis, we zoomed in to these moments of categorisation, made visible in the visualisations, and compared these with the value propositions uttered either explicitly in GA4 documentations or in the promotional materials surrounding the GA4 ecosystem. Quantifications, systems of categorisation, and visualisations are technologies in which GA4 builds and sustains a social imaginary.

The idea of social imaginary can be traced back to Cornelius Castoriadis and his book, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1987), originally published in 1975, where the social imaginary refers to the collective and shared system of meaning, symbols, and representations that shape a society's understanding of itself and its social reality, ideas of public purposes, public value, and the common good. It encompasses both conscious and unconscious dimensions, and is continually produced and transformed through social, cultural, and technological processes. While this notion of the term has been developed and employed by writers such as Charles Taylor (2004), Benedict Anderson (2006), and Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim (20015), the main idea of the imaginary is that our understanding of ourselves and the social, cultural, and technological world is created in meaning-making practices that are not self-evidently accessible to us (and never fully at all) but require active analysis and interpretation.

In research, imaginaries are often discussed as unifying at the national or global level. However, imaginaries can also differ across smaller segments of populations depending on their knowledge base, competencies, and practices. In the context of this article, GA4 is used by relatively few people, so the imaginary related to analytics data and the space

of possibilities within the GA4 dashboard are very specific. However, the specific sociotechnical imaginary relating to GA4 expands and touches significantly on how users/audiences, in general, can be considered in digital communication situations. For this reason, social imaginaries are often discussed in the plural. We can perhaps think of them as a collection of three-dimensional Venn-diagrams, with bigger and smaller circles, overlapping with other imaginaries in various degrees, being completely independent from some, and connecting with some through distant and weird connections. Social imaginaries are not unified wholes. They are also internally conflicting, brushing shoulders with both friendly and acrimonious neighbours. However, when questions are framed such that some circles and connections come into view, some imaginaries always dominate others. For example, GA4 analytics forms a knowledge base that requires specific competencies from its users and supports a distinct social imaginary. This imaginary is not exclusionary, perhaps nor particularly novel, but it is not without its effects.

Google's social imaginary refers to the collective understanding, beliefs, and values associated with the technology giant (and others like it) and its impact on society. These include ideas about the value of an overview of information, the immediacy of information, actions based on information, and precise knowledge about the (online) social behaviours of individuals/users. The values are in tension with other adjacent or competing technology values, such as privacy, centrality of the market, and technological prowess. In short, serving the public is great as long as service for the market is not compromised, safeguards for privacy are to be (legally) circumvented because that is what the market wants, and technology delivers improvements for the market, even when the results are mediocre at best. This persistent GA4 imaginary means that knowing the individual/users/market is less important than showing the higher-ups (bosses, marketing customers, etc.) in which digital communication works.

SOCIAL IMAGINARY RELATED TO THE PROFESSIONAL USERS OF THE GA

In making sense of how media producers view the audience, Nani (2018) demonstrates that even in the case of participatory digital productions, where there is a genuine possibility of engaging in participatory dialogue with the audience, producers still take the positions of paternalism, specialisation, and ritualism, where the audience is seen as copies of self. Similar to what Herbert Gans found in 1979, Nani's investigation encounters media makers who have little or no knowledge or interest in their actual audiences, but who make media for their superiors and themselves, assuming that what interests them also interest the audience (32).

Arguably, the relationship between customers and marketers is simpler: once the customer pays money for the services or products, especially if they are a returning customer, the marketing has done its job. The marketing message has reached the receiver and had the desired effect. However, even with marketing, the customer has more roles than simply making a purchase; for instance, customer engagement marketing (Harmeling *et al.* 2017) lists a host of different activities in which marketing can engage customers, such as sharing knowledge, providing referrals and recommendations, feedback and co-creation, assistance, and participation. In this context, the measurability of customers' actions, especially if the feedback is visible in and through digital channels, is only possible through close monitoring of web analytics. Iacobucci *et al.* (2019: 155) define marketing analytics as the study of data and modelling tools used to address marketing resources and customer-related business decisions. Tabesh *et al.* (2019) report that while data tools have been welcomed in the business world, their implementation is often seen as disappointing. Alby (2023) suggests that users of GA have inflated expectations that data literacy is built into the system, and they have a hard time even asking questions that can be

answered with data. Their study also shows that even consultants with more than ten years of experience in the field of web analytics found that machine learning and natural language skills are not useful (Alby 2023: 10). This corresponds to the analysis by Meganck *et al.* (2020), who found that while social/digital media, web design, and web maintenance skills are required for entry-level public relations positions, no data analysis skills are mentioned in job ads. Thus, professional expectations do not include data literacy skills that would allow scrutiny and understanding of digital communication analytics.

Thus, there is a lack of understanding of the data from web analytics. Communication practitioners do not often care about the consequences of collecting analytics data from users. However, they are not alone in the disregard of a deeper understanding of web analytics and the broader implications of the questions of privacy. In their analysis of public sector web services, Heino *et al.* (2022) show that web developers may not fully understand the consequences of using analytics services. Improving user experience is used as a reason to use analytics, but accumulating a large amount of data over time will end up being a privacy and integrity problem, as it allows profiling users by analytics collectors (as demonstrated by Kaur *et al.* 2017).

Previous research on GA focuses on its users and points out how marketers and other users struggle to comprehend and interpret the data to make proper use of it, and consequently “play” with the data rather than successfully use it for decision-making (Petersen and Martin 2015). The users of non-commercial blogs use analytics tools to improve site design or content, perhaps to understand their audiences; overall, GA analytics tools do not support non-commercial analysis ends (Sleeper *et al.* 2014). Furthermore, an overwhelming majority of the websites that use GA only use the standard installation and not the enhanced events measurements offered (Alby 2023). The overall message of the research is that GA is, in practice, very dif-

ficult to use, and its efficient use requires considerable financial and skill investment. The broader GA4 environment does not provide support for diverse user groups. Instead, the imagined user of GA is a combination of marketing/data specialists working in a large company selling products online. As such, Google’s own vision disregards the needs and practices of large user groups.

At the sight of the overwhelming complexity (under which there is no wealth but a lack of information), the marketing/data specialist makes middle-ground use of it to please their bosses/clients. As Iacobucci *et al.* (2019) point out, GA becomes a tool for a marketer, used not to understand the actions of customers in front of screens making choices but to display the presumed effectiveness of the marketer’s work.

IMAGINARIES AND VALUE PROPOSITIONS EMBEDDED IN THE GA4 DASHBOARD

We analysed symbolic representations within the dashboard to understand how meanings are constructed and communicated. This involves paying attention to semiotic codes such as word denotations and connotations, colour choices, spatial codes (left-right), and time codes (progression over time). By paying close attention, we find ways in which the translation between the machine-collected data is coded back to approximations of human behaviours. Additional comparisons with promotional materials and instruction manuals help us to divide the results into four metaphors that dominate the dashboard semiotics and argue that these metaphors contain value propositions about and how they engage with the world and are presumed to be valuable to the professional users of these dashboards.

The term *value proposition* (VP) comes from the marketing context, and in marketing research it refers to a tool that a company uses to communicate how it aims to provide value to its customers, sometimes including the cost of the VP for the

customer. This is often a concise statement explaining why a customer should purchase a company's goods or services. It should be noted that marketing research almost habitually comments that the term is under-researched and poorly understood (Kowalkowski et al. 2012; Ballantyne et al. 2011; Payne, Frow, and Eggert 2017).

The VP of Google Analytics is

expressed as follows:

"Different kinds of businesses can benefit from digital analytics:

- Publishers can use it to create a loyal, highly engaged audience and better align on-site advertising with user interests.
- E-commerce businesses can use digital analytics to understand customers' online purchasing behaviour and better market their products and services.
- Lead-generation sites can collect user information for sales teams to connect with potential leads." (The value of digital analytics n.d.)

Although Analytics's VP directly addresses businesses, Google's value proposition as a whole does not rely on a single, straightforward proposition like the above, but is rather a set of interconnected propositions linking search engine users (VP: relevant free results), online advertisers and advertising agencies (VP: access to targeted market information), website publishers (VP: detailed visitor information) into a "value constellation" (Payne, Frow, and Eggert 2017:474). It is worth noting that not all VPs are explicit (as in the above case) but can also be implicit: Google's VP for search engine users, for example, is implicit: the VP of relevant, ostensibly free, results are not expressed, nor is the actual payment with personal data made visible.

In this paper we consider GA4 to contain a "value constellation" of implicit VPs. While we present them as individual value propositions in all four cases, the proposed value is compromised by some dimension of value delivery and becomes part of the larger value constellation guiding the specificities of the GA4 imaginary for its users.

VALUE PROPOSITION: OVERVIEW

The value proposition overview is the key message of the entire GA dashboard (**Figure 1**) and, as such, it is the promise of all dashboards. As a collection of tables, graphs, and other visuals, the main message provides an overview of a data-dense reality, which can be approached from a multitude of goal-oriented angles. GA4 offers ready presets with presumed advertiser goals in mind, such as "drive online sales" and "generate leads." The restrained use of colours signals that the focus is on useful information, not a flashy presentation. The map signals the global reach and coverage of data gathering. By deliberately losing focus on the details of the data, the overview promises the possibility of controlling the complex reality: the whole is greater than the parts. The idea that a good overview allows one to control phenomena is further enhanced by the apparent easy customisability of the elements chosen to be displayed, suggesting the availability of new goal-oriented insights simply through the selection of visual data displayed.

GA4 excels at overview. Its imaginary of a data-dense global reality accessible through GA4, pulling information from a multitude of sources, is persuasive. However, this is precise because details are expected only at a very coarse level of granularity. The emphasis is on glancing. When looking closer, we see that there are not that many different types of data presented, and the insights these data allow are often quite limited. The insights are also strongly framed by the marketing language, ignoring the fact that GA4 has many non-commercial users. As such, the transcoding of the culture of being an audience or user comes together with the transcoding of users as commercial entities, whose activities and engagement need to be translated into transactions and revenues.

VALUE PROPOSITION: IMMEDIACY

Real-time data is another novelty of GA4, which, in principle, means that as soon

as someone visits a site or clicks a link, GA4 can show this activity as it occurs. The Realtime report promises to give an overview of the site or app use in the past 30 minutes. The 30-minute delay in data update, of course, is not the same as real-time; it is still historical, backward-looking data. Most likely, users have already left the site and do other things. However, the value promised by the immediacy of data is that marketers and communicators can react reasonably quickly and tweak their work as a quick reaction if they see something amiss in recent user actions. However, even if the immediacy of data is reasonably instantaneously actionable, it is of limited analytical value. There is no historical context, data may be skewed, and immediacy encourages impulsive reactions (Švajger 2023).

The value proposition of immediacy also assumes that users of GA4 dashboards constantly monitor the dashboard to receive feedback on their work. The underlying assumption is that the user is targeted by ongoing messages (alt. campaigns), website content is extremely dynamic, and the communicator needs to be quick at hand to change and alter communication. The immediacy proposes that professional users can receive feedback about the efficacy of their work from activities on the website. Thus, the data on the dashboards are not so much a reflection of the user's behaviour, but feedback for professional actions.

VALUE PROPOSITION: CONTROL

In GA4, professional users can decide what events count as conversions or key events, and thus highlight them as valuable metrics to follow for decision-making. The arrows up and down and the colours green and red attached to the percentages highlight the importance of the “% change” columns, and thus signal what user actions count as changes that should be acted upon. They suggest feedback metrics and a space of reflection on how the communicator or marketer can improve the results. Actionability is arguably the whole *raison*

d'être of the dashboard: to turn detailed and granular data into meaningful, overview, visible, and actionable data.

As mentioned above, control leads to actionability for the communicators to improve their work – by getting the percentages to go up by getting more good actions from the users, the communicators are able to improve their work. There is seemingly objective numerical feedback regarding the value of digital communication. However, as mentioned above, the value proposition comes from the transcoding process, where website user actions are considered convertible into profits or benefits. There is flexibility in deciding what is valuable and what is considered conversion, but the underlying assumption of a transactional nature with website visitors is clear in the imaginary.

VALUE PROPOSITION: KNOWING INDIVIDUALS/USERS

Thus, the value proposition of knowing the audience is one of the key promises of GA4. GA4 can provide demographic and interest-related data to profile the audiences from Google signals from the users who have signed in to their Google Account and turned on Ads personalisation, advertising ID for Android, or iOS Identifier for Advertisers (IDFA) if these identifiers are activated ([GA4] Demographic details report 2024). This means that demographic and interest-related information is provided only for users who have consented, and the data are not available for many users. Even if this information is available, GA4 provides information about the audience across the following dimensions: age, city, country, gender, interests, language, and region ([GA4] Demographic Details Report 2024). City, country, and region are derived from IP addresses, meaning that if people are using, for instance, VPNs, this information will not match the actual user location.

Figure 4 shows how the number of users of different age categories are displayed – by age over time on the left, users by age on the right, and more granular information about the users by age and their

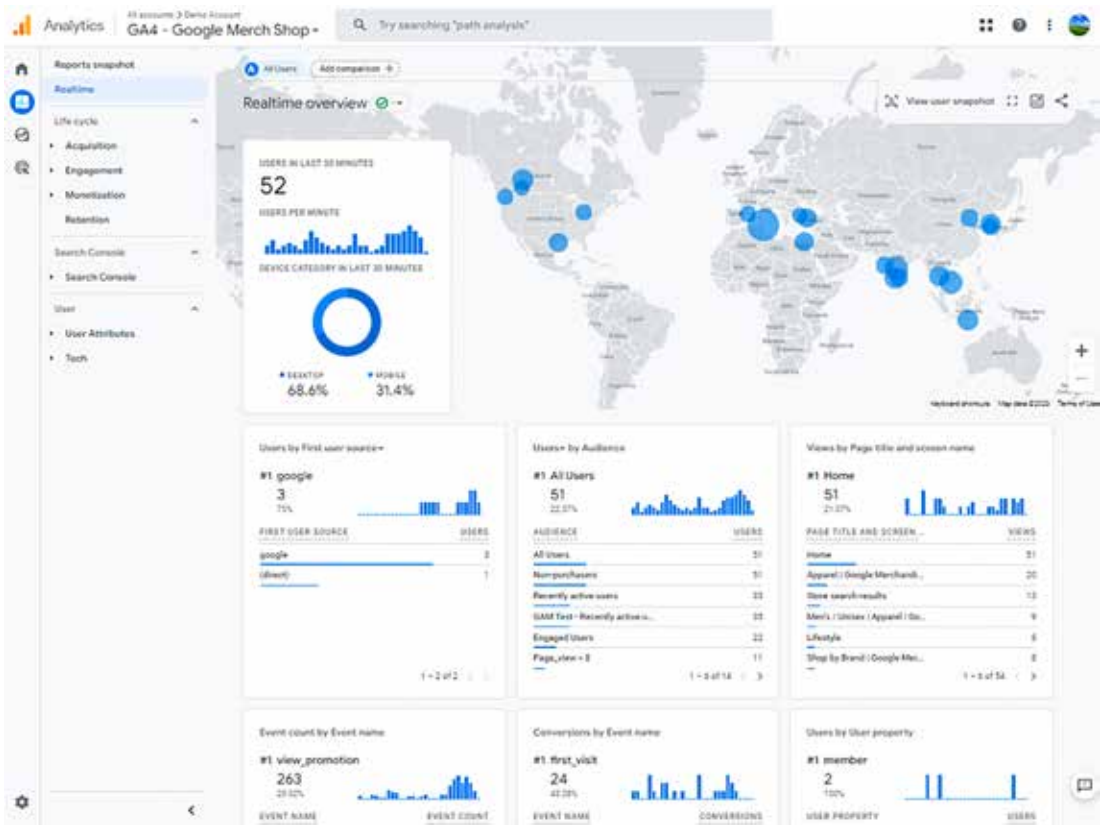
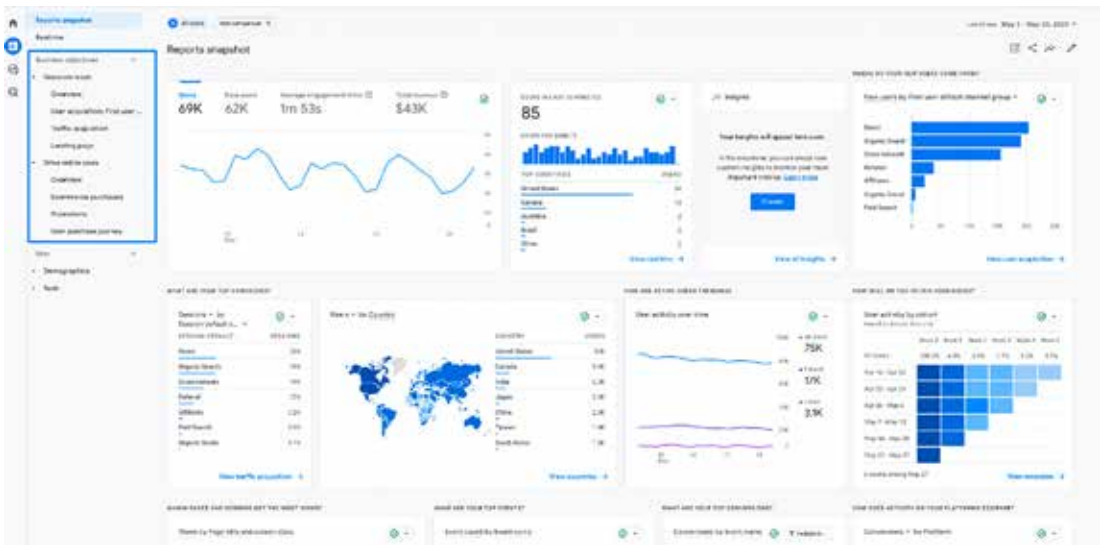


FIGURE 1. Overview. Example of GA4 full dashboard.
('GA4 Business Objectives Collection – Analytics Help' 2024)

FIGURE 2. Immediacy.
Realtime overview in GA4 (Švajger 2023)

Conversion	7	-	7	-	☐
file_download	8	↓ 50.0%	8	↓ 38.5%	☒
first_visit	3,703	↑ 36.6%	3,691	↑ 36.4%	☐
Menu_click	593	↑ 114.9%	304	↑ 141.3%	☐
new_mobile_user	9,108	↑ 28.9%	2,433	↑ 51.1%	☒
page_view	9,164	↑ 6.1%	4,021	↑ 33.9%	☐
scroll	1,552	↑ 5.7%	936	↑ 7.5%	☐
session_start	5,824	↑ 20.8%	4,020	↑ 33.8%	☐
video_complete	289	↑ 1,213.6%	29	↑ 70.6%	☒

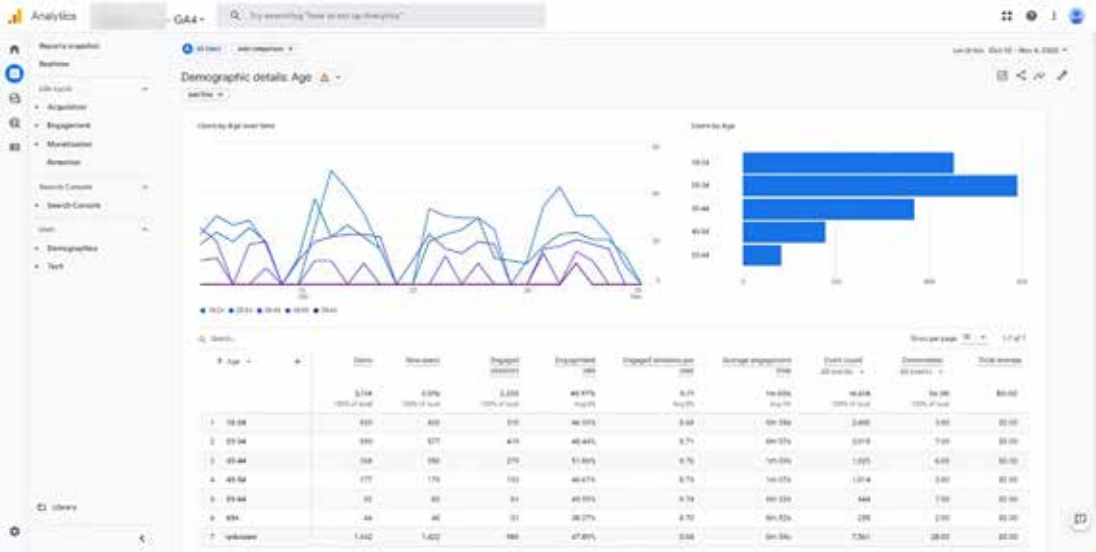


FIGURE 3. Control. Deciding the key events to track in GA4.
(‘Google Analytics 4 Conversion Tracking Guide – GA4 Goals’ 2023)

FIGURE 4. Knowing individuals/users.
(‘Find Universal Analytics Reports in Google Analytics 4’ 2022)

online engagement at the bottom. The top of the page is an overview, patterns by age, and the bottom of the page more detailed, more precise view with precise numbers. Thus, the overall promise is an overview of preciseness. However, if we zoom in on the precise view and look at the “Users” and “New users” columns, we notice that by far the largest number is in row 7, “unknown.” In almost half of the cases, in this example, GA4 does not know the age of the users, and in more than half of the cases, GA4 does not know the age of new users. When it comes to how users engage with the content, GA4 can be very precise about what each age group does; however, in half of the conversion cases, the age of the convert is unknown. Conversion here simply means that the user has completed some actions that he was expected to do, such as completing a purchase, downloading a file, checking the link, etc. Data analysis presents an illusion of precision. While in the small letters there is a disclaimer that this is an abstraction or generalisation, the visual mostly supports the claim of precision.

Being able to precisely connect user identity to user actions and habits was the strong value proposition of UA using cookies (despite problems of cross-platform tracking). The imaginary of the detailed knowledge of consumer/user behaviours was both the marketer utopia of knowing and serving the audience and the user dystopia of the surveillance panopticon. GA4, as mentioned earlier, leverages a multitude of tracking systems to create a credible user preciseness proposition. However, as pointed out in numerous discussions, GA4 is poor at identifying users; thus far, there is no equivalent replacement for the cookie, and using a Google account and other account user IDs does not have nearly as many users as cookies did. In this way, GA4 is more like what Latour (2005: 188) calls *panoramas*: “panoramas give the impression of complete control over what is being surveyed, even though they are partially blind and [...] nothing enters or leaves their walls except interested or baffled spectators.” To cover up the blindness,

GA4 it resorts to building “user profiles;” that is, user avatars of typical behaviours under certain conditions, because too many of users cannot be reliably identified. This value proposition is then arguably compensated by (a black box) AI computations in building the avatars, making them perform the work of user IDs.

Profiling audiences and customers across different sociodemographic characteristics is arguably still very relevant. GA4 promises to know the audiences across demographic (age and gender), geographic (location-based information), psychographics (matching the interest-related information) and behavioural (clicking and downloading content from the website, looking at the videos and completing the measurable behaviours as defined by the analytics user). However, if we take a closer look, not only is the data very limited in terms of availability, but it is also limited in terms of dimensions, and as argued by Bolin and Andersson Swartz (2015) follows a different type of data collection logic requiring translations of abstractions into more comprehensive categories. As such, communicators using analytics are expected to operate on a very limited knowledge base, which is also largely fictitious (Anthique 2018). This fits with the above-discussed proposition that not all communicators want to know the audience in any detail, lest they disrupt professionalism (Gans 1979, Nani 2018), but also shows how limited data availability transcodes the understandings about the audiences into what computers can know. Even when exemplifying what kind of actions the dashboard users might take based on the user data, the goal is not necessarily to better understand the user but to understand whether the work done on the site is serving the people well enough; for example, if purchases are made mostly with the desktop, it might give you a reason to investigate whether the mobile experience is not good for purchasing. Thus, while the intent of these profiling activities can be anchored to a wide spectrum of motivations, often claimed to be in the interest of the user and their experiences (Athique

2018), the data in these profiles are still constructed and transcoded in the chimaera of patterns and behaviours that are simultaneously manipulated and obscured by the users themselves.

CONCLUSION

Investigating imaginaries related to Google and stemming from using different Google services gives us insights into how lived experiences of our time are transcoded into data by one of the largest tech companies. In addition to the general usefulness of Google to the extent that the verb to search online has become synonymous with the company name already since 2000 ('Definition of GOOGLE' 2024), the public discussions about Google also include the biases and censoring of search results, the dominance of advertisement markets, the possible non-compliances of data protection regulations, the possible privacy breaches etc. The company's dominance within the platform society has led to discussions of data colonialism in critical data studies (Couldry and Meijas 2019). In general, the accumulation of user behaviours in the digital form has led to many critical discussions of datafication and platformization, where large parts of societal power are accumulated in the hands of a few (often predominantly US-based companies). Technology imposes not only a technology-oriented logic of translating culture into measurable and numerical actions, but also ingrains the capitalist spirit, which spreads through technical features, economic transactions, and social practices (Mager 2017).

Our investigation demonstrates that despite the overwhelming public perception that Google knows all about digital media users, the communication practitioners using Google services to understand the users of their digital environments are no closer to understanding audiences, as the data provided in these dashboards gives just a "chimaera" version of the people. The value propositions of overview, immediacy, control, and knowing users are presented strongly, but they do not hold up to closer

scrutiny. The actual actionability of the value is limited, but this is somewhat lost, as the users of these resources also have limited data literacy (as evidenced, for instance, by research from Alby 2023, Heino et al. 2022, Tabesh et al 2019). Thus, instead of informing professionals about the users of their digital environments, the numbers provided by the dashboard become feedback to base their work without much deeper reflection.

Google Analytics-related professional imaginary's penetration into the larger social imaginary about what technology can or cannot do is fragile, yet insidious. It works behind the scenes for marketers and professional communicators, and now, the social imaginary of privacy having tightened its public concern and legal grip, the market imaginary is slightly cut loose. It is still the ideal imaginary of the market, in the sense that it proposes to deliver the particulars that allow insights at the cost of privacy by using AI, avatars, and effective stand-in for the actual social behaviour of users. It is a virtual social imaginary with one step removed from the proposition. At the same time, precisely because GA4 still pursues the propositions, we can say that the market imaginary is as powerful as ever. There is no alternative to it in the web analysis of GA4. It remains an ideal to be pursued despite adversative political and social imaginaries.

In GA4, the individuals/users are only tracked within the limitations, and thus they become simulated, virtualized and aggregated with the help of the black-boxed AI tools, audiences remain "unknowns." Even if the limitations of the unknown are known to marketers (which can be questioned based on the research by Alby 2023), they still have to present GA4 data as if it contains actual users. However, with the projection of user value, promises have to be redrawn. When users and precision are more fragile in the GA imaginary, the value propositions relating to control and immediacy are enhanced to compensate for and promise actionability by the communicators.

Public concerns about privacy, GDPR law curtailment, and the techno-battle between marketers and ad-blockers have resulted in curtailing the market dominance of the social imaginary related to Google technologies. The conflict between the value of the public good of privacy and the value of market penetration of privacy is an ongoing battle in GA4. Currently, GA4 is forced to virtualize quite a big chunk of its value proposition, and AI is supposed to cover the gaps in the data. However, at the same time, together with transcoding knowing the audiences into dashboard knowledge, many commercial and transaction-oriented vocabulary has followed. Further research is needed to understand the commercial and non-commercial users of GA4 and other website analytics tools. How do they perceive the reflection of their work in the dashboards? Are audiences measured and considered relevant and real? How does the use of predominantly commercial language affect the relationship between public and private entities? These and many more questions need further investigation, as digital platforms actively mediate human interactions in public and private spheres.

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