

Z W A R S Z T A T Ó W B A D A W C Z Y C H

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ON ONLINE DONATIONS*****INTRODUCTION: THE GIFT CULTURE IN THE DIGITAL ERA**

The tradition of gift giving has been widely recognised as significant for culture, society and economics (Malinowski 1922; Lévi-Strauss 1969; Mauss 2001; Sahlins 1972; Cheal 1988). Gift giving might be perceived as a central aspect of human behaviour (Mysterud, Drevon, Slagsvold 2006). Komter and Vollebergh (1997) labelled it the “cement of social relationships”.

As the demands and preferences of societies changed, so too the customs and rituals of gift giving evolved. An important role here was played by technological progress: the multitude and availability of goods, facilitation of travel, and the development of postal services—to name just a few. However, it was the changes brought about by digitisation that turned out to be groundbreaking.

The current period of history is called the digital era due to the shift from traditional industry to an economy based on information and communications technology (Muchnik-Rozanov, Tsybulsky 2020). This

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shift has proved seminal for gift-giving behaviour. Along with the new opportunities, new preferences and expectations have emerged. Change has affected all the stages of gift giving, starting from choosing the gift (by internet browsing) and ending with its receipt (for example, an email notification of a gift being ready to collect from a store). Novelty has also appeared in the form of gifts that can now be digital.

Online gift giving has become easier than ever, and those who have given online gifts admit that they would not have given otherwise (Kizilcec et al. 2018). Despite this, compared with physical gifts the digital gifting process is characterized by weaker and asymmetric engagement (Kwon et al. 2017). However, thanks to social media platforms¹ and open collaboration communities, new branches have also appeared among digital gifts.

A specific area of sharing digital gifts is that of online communities. Rotman and Preece (2010: 320) define online community as “a group (or various subgroups) of people, brought together by a shared interest, using a virtual platform, to interact and create user-generated content that is accessible to all community members, while cultivating communal culture and adhering to specific norms”.

Examples such as Wikipedia or open source communities show that a digital gift does not necessarily have to be purchased. Any internet users who are willing to share their knowledge with others are provided with online tools to turn this knowledge into a gift for the online community. According to Kobus and Jemielniak (2014: 4), the “gift economy and open collaboration communities’ organization of work may be perceived as a new paradigm of reciprocal exchange”.

Donations constitute another interesting example of gift giving in the digital era. Although money is generally found unacceptable as a gift (Webley, Wilson 1989; Webley, Lea, Portalska 1983), donations correspond with gift cards in an obvious way: in both cases the recipient gets only the means to purchase something, but the object of the act of giving is basically the money.

Gift-giving behaviours may sustain continuity of community (Malinowski 1922) and there is no reason to believe that this rule does not apply

¹ Since there are many definitions of “platforms” in the sciences, I suggest understanding platform according to the definition of Van Dijck, Poell and De Waal (2018, s. 4): “An online ‘platform’ is a programmable digital architecture designed to organize interactions between user—not just end users but also corporate entities and public bodies. It is geared toward the systematic collection, algorithmic processing, circulation, and monetization of user data”.

to online communities. However, not every online community is based on sharing knowledge, experience, hobbies or fanarts, and so on. Sometimes what constitutes a community is common interest in specific creators' activities. Communities that have formed on YouTube or Twitch.tv are outstanding examples of such. They are sometimes highly structured (unlike open collaboration communities): there are leaders (creators) and elites (VIPs, moderators or extraordinarily generous donors). A few members may offer their work, such as film editing, creating graphics for the leader's content, or moderating content generated by other members. However, the main contribution to the community's development is activity based on comments, views or likes. These activities are always of equal standing, regardless of whether they are provided by the biggest fans or people only loosely related to the creator's community. Moreover, a single activity has virtually no meaning for the platform's algorithms; comments, likes and shares only have an affect when there are many of them. Apart from such activity, money is practically the only gift that members can bring to their community through various donation systems (Cyrek 2021).

Modern network architecture also allows users to exchange cryptocurrencies. Communities built around cryptocurrencies, decentralised finance and blockchain protocols have their own specificity; since I have not studied them, they are excluded from the deliberations in this paper.

Why is online donation a gift rather than commodity exchange? According to Gregory (1980: 641), gifts belong to "social conditions of the reproduction of people", while commodities belong to "social conditions of the reproduction of things". Therefore, gift exchange is related to reciprocal dependence that has established "a qualitative relationship between the transactors", while commodity exchange is related to "reciprocal independence that establishes a quantitative relationship between objects exchanged" (Gregory 1982: 100–101). The activity of online communities' members may be quantified, yet studies have shown that digital footprints left by internet users do not reflect real relationships, real influence or a sense of community (Wang et al. 2020; Rotman, Golbeck, Preece 2009). An online community is sustained by the qualitative relations between people rather than by quantitative interactions between objects and data fluctuation. In the case of livestreaming, reciprocity is part of netiquette; streamers are obliged to say donors' names and thank them (YouTube Creators 2020), which has resulted in many "say my name" memes about donor-streamer relations—however, this is a topic for another study.

Online donations may be entangled in every type of reciprocity:

- generalised, in the case of crowdfunding platforms (the donor does not stay anonymous, so they can expect help in the future);
- symmetrical, in the case of livestreaming (donor offers a gift, and the streamer responds immediately, providing information, answering a question or fulfilling a request);
- negative, both in crowdfunding and livestreaming (the recipient gets a donation “for nothing”—does not reciprocate the gift, without any consequences). Negative reciprocity may occur because donations may be given not only by community members, but also by strangers, for example accidental or occasional viewers (excluding the situation of livestreams broadcast for a closed circle of viewers, e.g. sponsors).

However, donors may or may not stay anonymous. Their anonymity may be preserved by not giving a name or nick (e.g. choosing anonymity in the options provided by the platform or entering only spaces in place of the name) or giving a different nick each time (not possible with Twitch’s Bits or YouTube’s SuperChat). The nick itself does not provide anonymity, because in the online environment the interaction between people is based on interaction between avatars (Przegalińska, Jemielniak 2015), thus while donors’ “real” name may stay anonymous, their nicks can be recognisable and even give them popularity.

How does a donor’s anonymity influence donating as gift-giving, when there is no reciprocity involved? As Laidlaw (2003: 632) suggests, “almost nothing ever could be” a “pure gift”, and impersonality might be a feature of both a commodity and “free gift”. The attention economy provides another solution to this problem, considering the anonymous donations given during livestreams. As Recktenwald (2016) argues, what streamers give in return for the donations is their attention. Streamers’ attention is a “scarce resource”, and therefore very desirable to the audience.

DONATIONS IN COMMUNICATION

Every act of gift giving carries a meaning. According to Belk (1977), symbolic communication between giver and recipient is the most general function of giving. Traditional models of communication, as Belk states, may be used to understand gift giving in terms of communication, if we replace the message and the channel with the gift. But communication through gift carries a higher risk of errors when encoding or decoding (Belk 1977). Cheal (1987: 152) states that “As a communications channel gift giving has limited capacity, in the sense that the range of messages

it can effectively convey is much smaller than can be conveyed through language”.

Modern donation systems allow users to send messages along with the money. This mechanism may be observed on crowdfunding platforms, where donors are able to leave a comment, and on livestreaming platforms, where a donor’s nick, donation value and message become a part of the broadcast and are on view to the entire audience. The latter brings numerous possibilities for shaping the meaning, such as words, emotes, GIFs, sounds (sometimes even recorded by donors themselves), and apart from the message content, also donors’ nicks or the amount² of money given to the streamer. Donation in terms of gift carries meaning in many ways, and language is only one of them. From this point of view, donations resemble gift cards, which sometimes have a special pocket dedicated to inserting money. Both in the case of donations and such gift cards, the amount of money is only one means of communication, and does not exclude words or the graphic design of the gift.

THE NEED FOR ONLINE DONATIONS STUDIES

Online donations, in communication that is asynchronous (on crowdfunding platforms) or quasi-synchronous (during livestreams), are a source of valuable information about contemporary digital culture. They may serve as an efficient source of data for many academic disciplines. A number of specific examples are listed below:

- Cultural studies—providing data on the culture of livestreaming, netiquette (Tedre, Kamppuri, Koimmers 2006), and the role of donating in sustaining or developing pre-existing customs and rules;
- Media studies—as an area of research on discourse, media influence, the uses and gratification theory (McQuail 1984), as an example of remediation (Bolter, Grusin 2000);
- Communication studies—as a new channel of communication, limited by technological requirements and positioned by an algorithm;
- Social sciences—as evidence of social change and the interference of technology in societal life, including the structuring of online communities;

² For example a donation of \$14.88 may refer to the so-called “14 words”—a motto common among white supremacists, and double H, which stands for “Heil Hitler” and is being depicted by two eights, since “H” is 8th letter of alphabet (Daro, Silverman 2018).

- Economy—as an area of research on the attention economy (Goldhaber 1997), as proof of development of the social media business model, in which the creators are financed not only by advertisers, but also by the users themselves;
- Psychology—providing information on various mechanisms influencing human behaviour, for example “donation war”, where the goal is to give more money than any other viewer;
- Jurisprudence—as a field of research on legal solutions implemented on platforms, to search for legal gaps and prevent donors from breaking the law, for example by spreading hateful content (Kreft 2018);
- Linguistics—providing information about a linguistic norm (Paolillo et al. 2005) and the dynamics of its change in this type of communication.

Online donations may also serve as a useful source of data for interdisciplinary analyses. They can be the subject of both quantitative and qualitative research. Moreover, they can be used to obtain further data, such as subsequent donations from other users. However, as a relatively new phenomenon in the media ecosystem, they are not easy to analyse, and perhaps that is why their potential has not yet been tapped in academic disciplines.

Sherry (1983) divided the components of gift giving into three types: 1) situational conditions, 2) gifts, and 3) donors and recipients. This typology helped in the organising of methodological guidelines for online donations studies, presented below.

METHODOLOGICAL GUIDELINES

Situational conditions

Data source selection. Depending on the purpose of the study, researchers should always carefully consider the selection of research data. In the case of online donations, this principle is extremely important because the first decisions made in the research process can completely define the course of the study.

In the case of donations given through crowdfunding platforms, one of the first decisions that must be made is the axis of the research: is it going to be one platform (and different fundraising campaigns carried out there), a single fundraising goal (conducted on various platforms), or maybe separate but possibly comparable fundraisers for similar goals.

Similar rules apply to studies on donations given during livestreams. Researchers may stick to one streaming platform or compare a number

of them. The same streamer may use different platforms (for example YouTube and Twitch.tv) for broadcasting, and sometimes dedicate content to each of them.

Choosing streamers suitable for the purpose of the study is another important step. For example studies on the possible influence of donations' message content should take a closer look at streamers considered influencers, or those with the highest numbers of viewers or subscribers. If researchers raise the question of a particular topic, it would be understandable to choose streamers who tackle it in their broadcasts.

A very important issue that cannot be ignored is the context of the community. The communal-commitment paradigm of gift giving also concerns online activities within gift-giving behaviours (Hollenbeck, Peters, Zinkhan 2006). Knowledge of a given community's norms and customs (for example, is there an amount below which it is considered inappropriate to donate) is crucial for studies on online donations.

The context of the community is also of great importance for analysis of the content of donations' messages. Without familiarity with the chosen community, such elements as sociolect, beliefs, inside jokes or prohibited phrases—to name just a few—cannot be properly interpreted. On streaming platforms, a community usually announces the rules for contributing to a chat. It can be assumed, with a little caution, that the rules will also apply to communication via donations. However, confirming this thesis in the case of a particular community requires watching at least a few streams.

Once the appropriate streaming platform(s) and streamers have been chosen, the matter of choice of livestreams remains. Various factors may be relevant here, such as the invited guests, political and social circumstances, new streamer events on the topic, or the circumstances of the streamer's private life. For online donations studies, the context of the particular stream is also crucial. Sometimes a donation's message is understandable only in the context of the overall broadcast. There are also cases where irony or sarcasm cannot be grasped outside of the livestream's context. Therefore, the selection of the livestream is extremely important, because the analysis of donations given during it requires viewing the livestream in full. Some platforms allow users to upload the completed broadcasts to an archive. However, researchers should be aware that streamers may sometimes edit the broadcast before archiving it, meaning that there is a risk of missing data on account of not watching the stream while it was live.

Restrictions and limitations of the selected platform. There are numerous legal regulations related to media usage. Legal requirements imposed by platforms must not be in conflict with national or international law. In addition, members of online communities apply internal rules that must not contradict the regulations of the platform concerned. This legal aspect should always be taken into account in online donations studies. The awareness of platforms' restrictions is fundamental to online donations research. Studies should always stress to what extent the phenomena analysed are (or might be) driven by the platforms' structure, limitations and legal aspects. This rule applies to both crowdfunding and livestreaming platforms.

For economic analyses, platforms' restrictions should be particularly interesting in the context of commission, taxes, and limits to the size of donations. The dependence of the commission on the chosen method of payment seems to be an extremely interesting issue. Websites enabling donation allow users to pay, for example, by SMS, rapid transfer or PayPal. There are differences in the commission depending on the method chosen, and it is worth verifying whether donors are aware of them, and whether these differences influence donors' decisions. Researchers who analyse the economic aspects of online donations should also be aware of limits imposed on the amounts given. This may lead to interesting conclusions, for example regarding frequency of the smallest and largest possible donations.

For psychological and sociological analyses, as well as for analyses concerning the attention economy, platforms' rules on the positioning of certain donations will play a significant role. Seeking status and prestige is a common motive of gift giving and donating (Lampen, Bhalla 2007; Harbaugh 1998a, 1998b). Many platforms use the human need to stand out and be appreciated when developing their online donations systems. Features such as sound effects, GIFs, font effects, message length and display time may depend on the amount of a donation. There may be different features for particular tiers. Awareness of these tiers and the benefits they provide may be crucial for the research being conducted. Once again, it is worth verifying whether these differences influence donors' decisions.

Researchers studying internet culture, online communication norms, language evolution or netiquette should be aware of platforms' regulations on message length. The absence of polite phrases, abbreviation of words, or omission of punctuation might not necessarily be a matter of the donor's knowledge or attitude. Sometimes such an approach is used deliberately due to restrictions imposed by platforms.

Another issue of great importance is algorithmic oversight. Just because no hateful donation messages are displayed it does not mean that no such donations were sent. Sometimes overseeing is about blocking words; in such cases asterisks will be displayed instead of letters. Other times the whole donation is removed by the system. This issue is very problematic for both platforms and donation beneficiaries, since some donors persist in trying to deceive the algorithm. For example if a donation has numbers in place of certain letters, or in-word spaces, researchers should be very attentive, because they may just be witnessing an attempt to circumvent oversight.

Pondering over platforms' limitations, it is worth pointing out their capabilities. Especially in the case of providing donating tools during livestreams. While some of the platforms provide their own tools, others allow for outside money-transfer services. Sometimes both options are available. Researchers should pay attention to all of the services available. Even if they choose to analyse only one tool, comparing the different options at hand might bring new ideas or conclusions, and could certainly justify the decision of choosing a particular one for research purposes. If platforms allow for more than one donating service, all of their limitations, restrictions and capabilities should be known to the researcher. If one of the services is used most or least often, researchers should look for the reasons in the commission, payment methods, amount limits, features available in messages, algorithmic oversight, as well as the interface and accessibility via mobile devices.

Gifts

The form and message content of donations. Each platform may offer different tools for creating donations. Knowledge of what forms of donation are available is crucial for studies in this area. Researchers should be aware of all available features, even if they did not occur in the analysed set of donations. An important question to ask here is whether there were any features available that remained unused, and if so, why. As mentioned earlier, there may be a system of donation tiers in use. In such a case, the size of particular donations may be the reason. Other factors may also influence donor choices in regard to the form of donation, for example its visibility, ease of applying, and pressure from other donors. In the case of livestreaming, it is also important to note whether particular forms have more impact on the course of the broadcasts, as well as whether the streamers emphasise their approval for specific forms.

Some platforms' donation options are given in pictorial form. Their interpretation may be a bit difficult if there is no legend explaining their meaning. Another major problem that emerges here is the issue of overarching value. Researchers need to be aware that any donation message using pictograms may not necessarily have been chosen for what it communicates; perhaps its cost was more important. While examining the donations' message content, researchers should always remember that donors do not necessarily communicate in the way they would like to—maybe they just do it the way they can, within the means provided by the platform, or within their own budget.

The issue of overarching value also relates to “empty” donations: those with no message at all. Sometimes lack of message content is due to the amount given: the lowest tiers may not allow the posting of any content. However, even some very large donations happen to be “empty”. In such cases, it should not be assumed that it was because of the donors' financial constraints. It was rather by mistake, or because of altruistic values holding greater importance than communicative values.

Analysis of donations' messages always requires knowledge of the context, as mentioned earlier. Beyond such factors as global and national circumstances, topics currently common in the media, and even the context of a given fundraiser or stream, the context of the community, cannot be overestimated. Even if researchers are familiar with a subject that appears in donations, the lack of knowledge of the sociolect, of the community sense of humour, intentional spelling mistakes, and common sayings and jokes may adversely affect the interpretation of their findings.

Donors and recipients

Donors. One of the biggest challenges in online donations studies is identifying the characteristics of donors. Depending on the platform and the services available, donors may remain anonymous, use different nicks for specific donations, or sign their donations with their user names established when they registered on the platform. Since the last of these seems the easiest for researchers, it shows exactly how nothing is obvious in online donations studies. Research focused on donors must always take into account the rules that the platform applies in regard to changing a username. In particular the question is whether, in the case of donations already offered, for example on past streams, the name of the donor will be displayed as it was at that time or as it is today.

The issue of donor description becomes even more complicated if platforms or the services they provide allow donors to insert their name. The same donor may give a number of donations and never be recognised as the same person. Such behaviour is inconsistent with the theory of prestige as a motive of making charitable transfers (Harbaugh 1998a, 1998b). However, it cannot be presumed with certainty that it does not exist.

The case of entering the donor's name with each donation carries more difficulties for donor-oriented studies. Mistakes are the first problem. For example, if there are three donations, one given by "Smith", another by "Smth", and the third by "smith", should researchers classify them as given by the same donor? Sometimes the donors themselves dispel doubts in this matter. They may admit to a mistake in a subsequent donation or, in the case of livestreams, in the chat window. The second problem involves impersonation. This can be observed in particular during livestreams, because in this case giving donations of a great amount guarantees the streamer's attention and approval. Impersonating a generous donor secures the streamer's attention without incurring high costs. In such cases, subsequent donations or chat can also be a source of information regarding whether or not there has been an impersonation. But is this reliable? This question must be answered by each researcher, but knowledge of the community that gathers on the stream may be crucial, or at least very helpful.

If donors are able to insert nicks for every individual donation, the nick may also be a key to interpreting the message content. The following example shows both the impersonation and the meaning of the context:

Epstein: Greetings to you [streamer name], and remember I didn't kill myself myself [pol. *Pozdrawiam Cię [nazwa streamera] i pamiętaj, że sam się nie zabiłem*]

Although research into the donor perspective may seem complicated, it is worth taking a closer look at this issue. It may be helpful to go beyond the donations themselves and to conduct a survey among members of a given community or, for example, users of a given crowdfunding platform. Although we cannot be certain that the people we are researching are the same people whose donations we are analysing, such research may bring many new ideas to the interpretation of the findings—or even inspire the researcher community to develop new theories or verify new theses.

Streamer's influence. In the case of livestreaming, the streamer's influence on donating practices is not without significance. This influence directly covers all previous areas of donations research. Livestreaming platforms may allow outside services as donating tools. But such an option does not necessarily have to be used by the streamer.

Services that charge less commission may be recommended by streamers, who also may encourage viewers to give larger donations. It is a common practice among streamers to display the ranking of donors during their broadcast. If the broadcaster does not want donors to use a particular money transfer service (for example in the event of it being impossible to disable this service), they may omit donations given through this service in the donor ranks. Thus, those donors who want to be awarded for their generosity with a highly-ranked position will omit a service that has been excluded.

In some cases the donation tiers may also be set by streamers. Word-blocking and other forms of automated oversight may also, to some extent, be regulated by the broadcasters. Restrictions and limitations come not only from the platform.

In the case of the donations' form and message content, much may depend on streamer preferences. Broadcasters' influence may be the answer to many questions raised in this article. In the case of donation messages using pictograms and the motives for choosing particular ones, the answer may be: "because the streamer claims to like them". A similar reason may also occur for text messages. For example, if a rare dialect appears in the donation text, it does not necessarily indicate the origin of the donor; it may indicate the origin of the streamer, refer to a place the streamer has recently visited, or perhaps the streamer once said that they liked this dialect, and so on.

Streamers' familiarity with their community members may also be helpful for exposing impersonation. Streamers can point to differences impossible for researchers to detect, such as spelling, the usage of single words, or the grammatical structure of a sentence.

Other conditions

Data analysis methods. Depending on their form, donations' message content can be subjected to virtually all known methods of text analysis, both quantitative and qualitative. Analysis may become a bit more complicated in the case of pictogram-based messages. Researchers should be familiar with up-to-date internet communication trends, and

online guides explaining GIFs or emoticons may be helpful here (for example Dewey 2016; Pardee 2017). However, worth remembering is that a given community may lend its own meanings to such content. And this meaning may change at any time, such as during a particular broadcast.

In understanding the message content of a donation, it is sometimes necessary to take into account the donor's name, the time of giving the donation or the amount given, which may be, for example, an element of a joke or wordplay.

Comparative analyses are also suitable for online donations studies. The research can compare donations within the same livestream fundraiser, within different livestream fundraisers by the same person or donations given for different goals or to different streamers on the same platform. Such analyses may reveal both past and prevailing trends and dependencies.

Donations can also be used for economic analysis. The incidence of given amounts and forms of donations may be a source of knowledge on current trends and might be used to forecast social media market development. Longitudinal studies are also relevant for research on donations. Since "crowdfunding campaigns that raise at least 30% of their goal within their first week are more likely to reach their goal" (Shepherd 2020), it may be worth verifying whether similar correlations can be seen in the case of livestreaming, where fundraiser goals are often displayed on the screen.

Analysis of the correlation between the form, message content and value of donations may bring new conclusions, valuable not only for the social sciences, or culture and media studies, but also for practitioners working directly in fundraising campaigns or social media.

Limitations and ethical dilemmas. Although online donations studies can provide valuable information about the modern economy, society and digital culture, research in this area is not without its limitations. The first and perhaps the greatest obstacle that researchers must face is obtaining donation data for the research. The cheapest but also the most time-consuming form is to write the data down by oneself during the fundraiser or livestream. Some data may be copied and pasted into an analysis program, but data only displayed on-screen as an element of the broadcast will require manual entry. The solution to this problem could be the development of automated tools. For example, a program that could recognise a donation anywhere on screen and copy it into a selected dataset. Another automated tool could be an app that would send requests

to an API platform and receive the data (donation time, amount, message content and donor's name) in response. However, such a solution requires compliance with legal requirements, such as data protection. Perhaps a declaration of using the data received for statistical purposes could facilitate the implementation of such a tool.

Another solution to this problem is obtaining datasets from the platforms or companies handling donations. In this case, the researcher must take into account the costs and legal requirements of such a service. Whether companies can share data may depend on national or international data protection regulations, company policy, or their contracts with given streamers or fundraiser founder.

In the case of entering manual data from completed fundraisers or livestreams (from the past), it should be noted that some of the material could have been removed or edited. Sourcing data directly from companies will eliminate this problem. Comparing material obtained from companies with that collected manually can also be a source of relevant knowledge. The findings of such a study can show what the streamer or fundraiser founder wanted to hide, and indicate any errors that may have occurred in the manual entry of data. However, revealing what was removed or hidden poses an ethical dilemma. Its solution may be to generalise the results and to conceal the name of the streamer, or in the case of crowdfunding, the goal of the fundraiser.

Another limitation of the research is the issue of duplicate donations. Sometimes two or more donations with the same amount, message content and donor's name can be found in the dataset. In the case of crowdfunding, this may be an attempt to underscore the donor's words, for example their wishes expressed for the beneficiary. In the case of livestreaming, such a situation may be due to communication failure with the initial donation. If the streamer was absent when the initial donation was given, if they omitted the donation (on purpose or accidentally), or if the donor missed the streamer's thanks and reply—then the donor may try again, with another donation no different to the initial one. However, the same donation may also be displayed multiple times due to bugs on the platform. Sometimes even streamers are not sure whether they are dealing with the same donations being made again or a bug.

As has already been mentioned in this article, studies on online donations require knowledge of the context of the community. This may limit the conducting of large-scale research. Comparing a variety of fundraisers or streams, apart from in the case of strictly economic analyses, will require either very broad researcher knowledge of the

given communities and internet communication trends, or a very large team. Both cases may see the research being limited partly due to a lack of appropriate specialists, or shortage of resources and difficulties with communication among members of large teams.

In the case of difficulties associated with large-scale research, there is another problem: representativeness. Understanding the phenomenon of donations without knowing the relevant contexts is in many cases difficult, and sometimes even impossible. However, the results of one fundraiser goal or one streamer cannot be extrapolated to the entire population. Nevertheless, such results can be used to demonstrate dependencies, categories of donations or their social impact—and these can serve other researchers and help in the developing of online donations studies until more effective methods of data analysis are available.

Although research on donations as overt forms of communication does not seem to be burdened with ethical dilemmas, it is worth paying attention to situations in which such dilemmas cannot be avoided. Research on donations may take the form of covert participant or non-participant observation. For example some livestreams are not publicly accessible, for example if they are dedicated to a specific group of users such as subscribers or (a given tier's) supporters. If researchers belong to such a group, they may face the dilemma of disclosing non-public data. Covert participant observation meets even more ethical challenges. Donating by a researcher is the most obvious example here. Donations may push streamers towards extreme behaviour (Artwick 2018), including not only hate speech but also on-stream violence, or even killing (Stewart 2020). Pushing streamers towards certain behaviour or encouraging other donors to give more donations may have unexpected consequences. However, the sciences have developed certain rules for conducting research using this method (Homan 1980; Spicker 2011) and there is no reason to believe that they are not applicable to online research.

CONCLUSION

Digitisation and the ubiquity of media has not changed the role of gifts in societal life. However, some principles of community formation have changed, for example the sharing of a geographic area (Hillery 1955). Geographical boundaries no longer define community; the new shared space is cyberspace. The form of gifts has also changed, and they can now be entirely digital. In this article I have depicted online donations as new digital gifts—within the context of online communities and social media

platforms—and emphasised the potential of online donations as a source of information significant for many researches in various disciplines.

Although online donations form an uneasy dataset, the data in them can bring knowledge about the digitalised world surrounding us. I have discussed here selected issues that are worth paying attention to while conducting studies on online donations, and have shared obstacles, limitations and ethical dilemmas I encountered during previous research in this area. Perhaps these tips will make donations research easier, and consequently more popular.

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Abstract

The article proposes methodological guidelines for studies on a new tool in communication and gift-giving: online donations. It looks at donations in the context of gift culture, with particular emphasis on the changes introduced by digitisation. The author argues that online donations are a source of valuable data, which could prove useful for many sciences. As a very specific and relatively new form on the media market, donations are not an easy research material. An outline is provided of the methodology in studies on online donations, including challenges and problems that researchers may encounter. The solutions presented in the article are the result of the author's three years of work in the field of collecting and analysing online donation data.

key words: online donations, digital era, gift culture, gifts in communication, livestreaming, social media platforms

ZARYS METODOLOGII BADANIA DONACJI INTERNETOWYCH

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Abstrakt

Celem artykułu jest przedłożenie wskazówek metodologicznych do badań nad nowym narzędziem komunikowania i obdarowywania — donacjami internetowymi. Autorka skupia się na donacjach w kontekście kultury daru, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem zmian wprowadzanych przez digitalizację. Przekonuje, że darowizny internetowe są źródłem cennych danych, które mogą być przydatne w wielu naukach. Jako bardzo specyficzna i stosunkowo nowa forma na rynku mediów darowizny nie są łatwym materiałem badawczym. Artykuł zawiera zarys metodologii badań nad donacjami, w tym charakterystykę wyzwań i problemów, z jakimi mogą mierzyć się badacze i badaczki. Przedstawione w tekście rozwiązania są wynikiem trzyletniej pracy autorki w zakresie gromadzenia i analizy donacji internetowych.

słowa kluczowe: donacje internetowe, era cyfrowa, kultura daru, podarki w komunikacji, streaming na żywo, platformy społecznościowe