



Ine van Zeeland, imec-SMIT, Vrije Universiteit Brussel

# **Research question**

Why do public service media (PSM)

process user data via cookies,

despite legal and public trust risks?





Cookies in the public interest - A case study of a public service media (PSM) organisation's reasons for user tracking



#### The cookie conundrum

3

2

Case study set-up

4

Findings: cookies in the public interest?



Discussion and conclusions



# PSM in digital society

Competing with various market players, PSM have to justify state funding.

**I** PSM are to make a "contribution to society" or deliver "public value".

The popularity of SVODs\* and other platforms has raised expectations of personalisation.

I PSM cannot compete with large platforms but have to seek collaborations.

\* SVOD = subscription video-on-demand, e.g. Netflix.



## The cookie conundrum

Personalised content and advertising requires (a lot of) personal data.

Tracking involves a complex system of publishers, advertisers, infrastructure, intermediaries.

Individual risks can be legal, reputational, financial, intellectual. And there are risks to society.

(Cookie) tracking is regulated by the ePD, the GDPR, the DSA, a.o.

Tracking often requires consent from the media user.



#### 4 propositions on cookie use by PSM

PSM use cookie-derived user data for **accountability** purposes, to demonstrate wide audience reach, both in market share and numbers for specific audiences.

**2** PSM use cookie-derived user data with the aim of obtaining **advertising** revenue.

**3** PSM use cookie-derived user data because they believe they need to **personalise** content and advertising to meet audience needs.

PSM use cookie-derived user data because they are caught up in technology platforms' ecosystem of personal data processing.



## Case study set-up

**1** 9 months of participatory observation in a PSM.

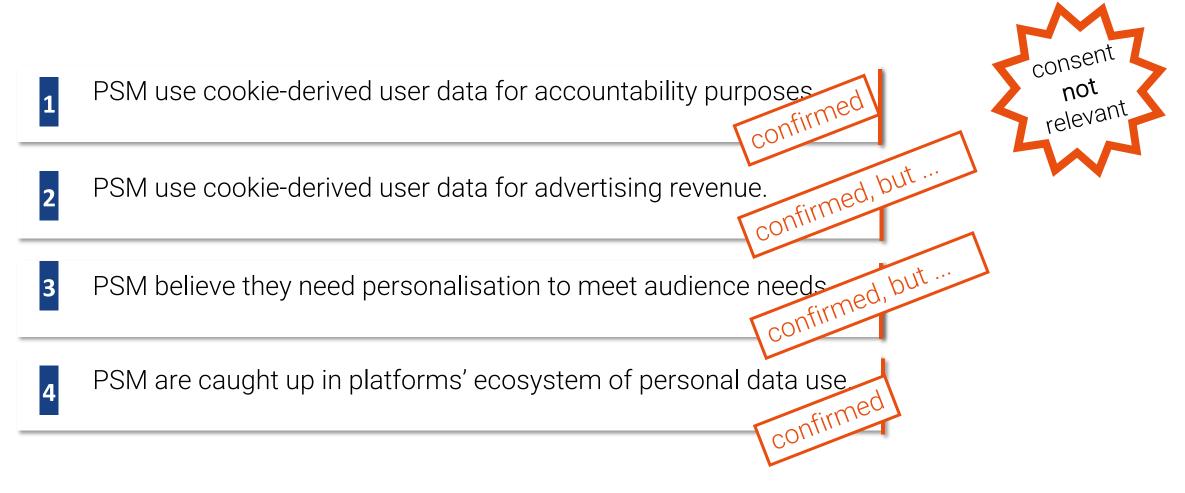
**I** PSM in a 'small media market', obliged by law to meet performance indicators.

Performance indicators include wide and diverse audience reach.

**I** Documentation was used to corroborate or challenge the observational findings.



### Findings: cookies in the public interest?





# Findings: other reasons for tracking

technology and infrastructure (coercion)

mimetic isomorphism: others do it too

lack of knowledge/budget for alternatives



# Discussion and conclusions

Why do PSM process user data via cookies, despite legal and public trust risks?

All propositions confirmed, but with more detail and nuance.

Three other reasons found why PSM use cookies, that need to be taken seriously.

While public trust is mentioned sometimes, legal problems were mentioned much more often.

Public values or the public interest are hardly a topic in everyday practice.



# Thank you for your attention

#### Questions, suggestions? ine.van.zeeland@vub.be



