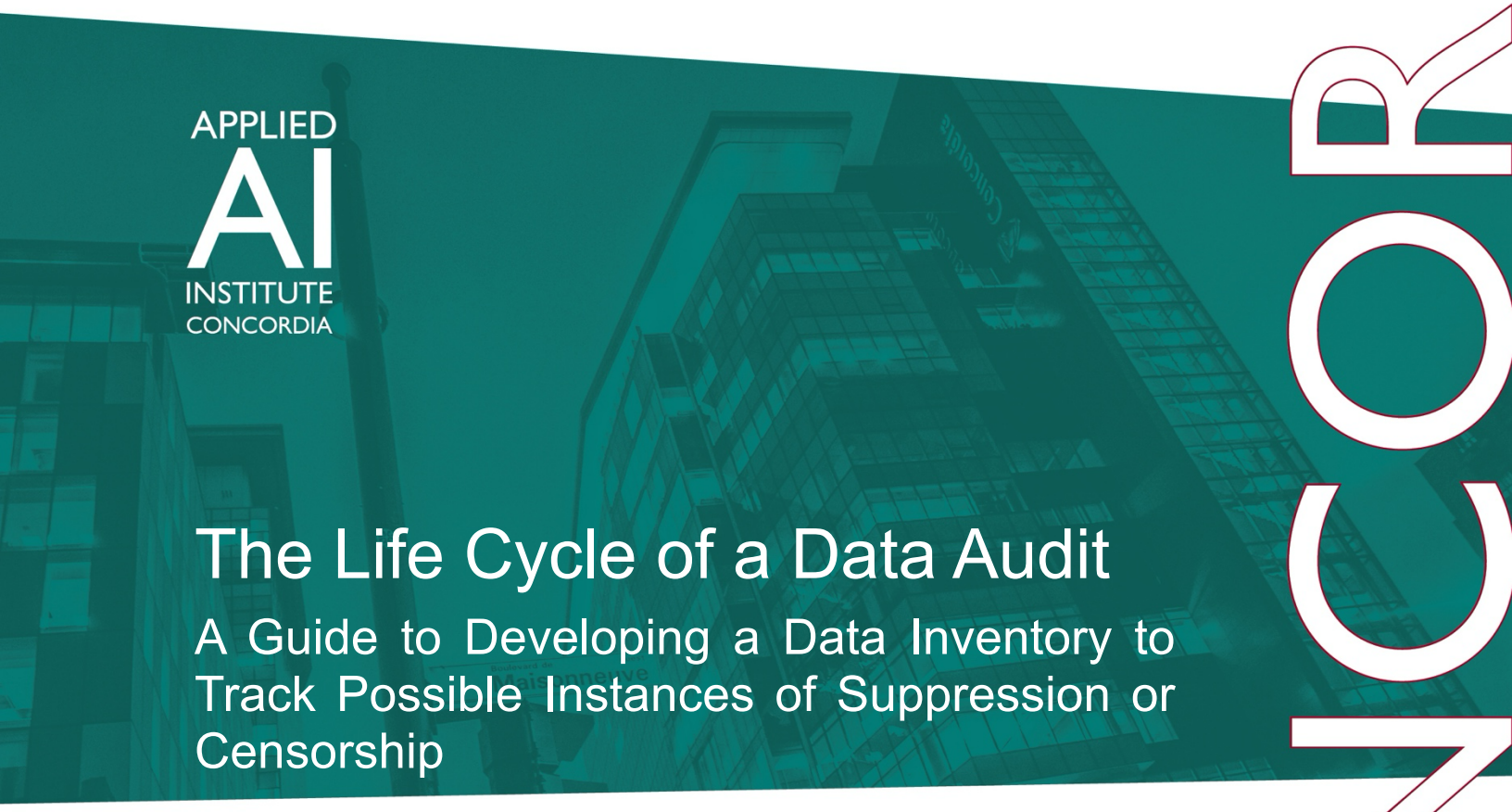
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The Life Cycle of a Data Audit

A Guide to Developing a Data Inventory to Track Possible Instances of Suppression or Censorship

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In Collaboration with Women on Web

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Overview

In partnership with Concordia University, Women on Web recently analyzed its experiences of digital suppression and censorship. By amassing WoW's online data in aggregate, the organization explored trends and patterns that illustrated a bigger picture of its digital contexts and what they mean for care seekers.

Throughout this process, some helpful steps were compiled to develop guidance for other organizations potentially facing similar challenges through their own data inventory to conduct their own audit of their digital presence.

Key Terms

Data audit: Evaluation of aggregate online data sources and information.

Online patterns: Reoccurring anomalies or algorithmic behaviour, including ongoing suppression or censorship of content.

Algorithmic bias and algorithmic discrimination: Systems of oppression repeated or reinforced through online platforms' algorithmic moderation.

Privilege hazard[1]: Blind spots experienced when one does not have the ability to see outside of their own lived experience, including software developers, creators, and engineers.

[1] D'Ignazio, C., & Klein, L. F. (2020). *Data feminism*. The MIT Press.

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Phase One: What are your data sources?

The goal of the first phase is to identify what data you have and to start organizing it.

Key questions:

- How many websites do you have? One or more?
- Do you have any social media accounts? How many? On which platforms?
- Do you have any online advertising or business accounts?
- Do you have access to the analytics of these sites and accounts?

Write down all the sources of data you have and organize them in a single place, such as an Excel spreadsheet.

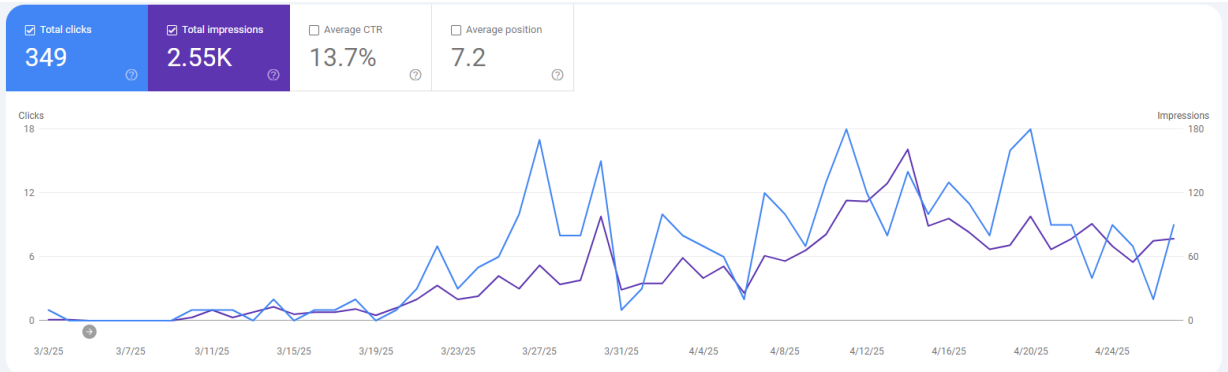


Figure 1: An example of the rate of clicks and impressions taken from WoW's website analytics from 2023-2025.

Women on Web website analytics are a critical data source for this organization since the website helps deliver key services.

Phase Two: Categorize your aggregated data

Not all data is the same. Data tell different stories, and the second phase aims to help you decide which data can tell you what you need.

Key Questions:

- Which analytics document activity for your social media page(s) vs. your website(s)?
- How far back in time do your analytics go?
- Do you have any posts or pages that were removed or suspended? When? For how long? How were they restored? Were you provided with any reason for their suspension?

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Sometimes patterns or instances of online suppression can be difficult to spot. Focusing on one data source at a time will help you start to get a clearer sense of what's happening. This process may also reveal more factors impacting your sites and pages than you realized.

Phase 3: Document patterns

Preliminary data analysis starts with looking for patterns. The goal is to spot changes that might require more research.

Key Questions:

- Do you notice any patterns in some of your content, such as the removal of posts that discuss specific topics or use certain language?
- Are there drops or peaks in your traffic analytics? When do they happen?
- Are members of your community noticing instances, changes, and/or anomalies online?

The evidence for instances of suppression and censorship can be fleeting and sometimes difficult to parse, so it's important to keep track of them. WoW was able to detect patterns more clearly once the data was documented and organized, making it easier to develop a story and make a case describing the nature of the censorship.

Example

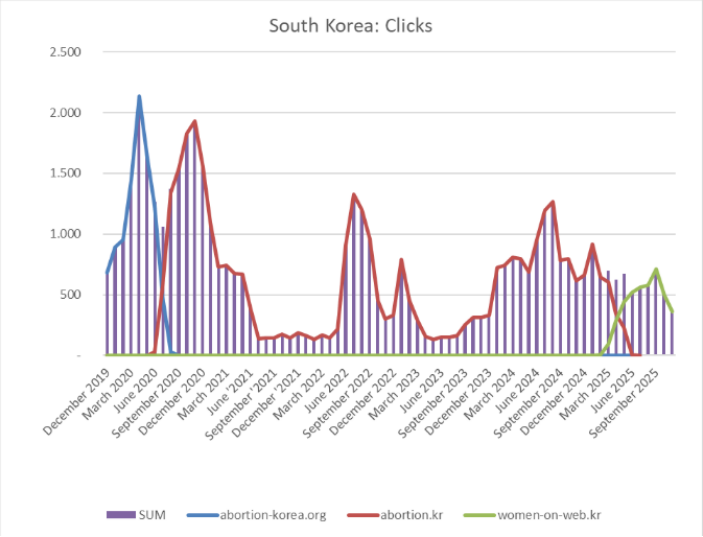


Figure 2: The sum of the clicks on WoW's Korean sibling pages from 2019-2025.

Women on Web's Korean website saw large drops in traffic repeatedly. Figure 2 compares click rates among different versions of the site, prompting further research into what's causing those drops.

Phase 4: Distinguish possible factors for what you're seeing

The data might show that something has happened, but *why* may remain a mystery. Phase 4 encourages you to put the pieces together to understand the factors behind the changes you see.

Key Questions:

- What are the possible factors for trends or anomalies you see in your data?

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- Were there impacts from what you're seeing? What were they?
- Are there possible biases at play?

Abortion faces oppression in multiple social domains, as its importance is often felt most intensely as a lived experience, even as abortion-seekers' experiences become caught in political debates. This means abortion is vulnerable to gender bias, and its importance could be easily missed due to privilege hazards,[4] which can be wielded to subjugate women and pregnant people. Digging deeper to distinguish social, political, and other factors specific to your organization's work that make it a target for incidents of suppression or discrimination makes it easier to understand what actions need to be taken and paints a clearer picture of how your work is impacted on a larger scale.

Phase 5: Identify Challenges or Gaps in the data

Data is always incomplete and as the audit ends, part of what remains is to understand what is missing.

Key Questions:

- Are there barriers to overcome in telling the story with the evidence you have? (Just because something is missing doesn't mean it's not valid; the reason it's missing is a part of your case)
- Are these merely logistical challenges or are they systemic? Are they isolated or on-going?
- Are there data gaps, or data that you don't have access to?

Some of the issues you may be experiencing may have deeper implications. Thinking about the narrative you are trying to impart, and the information needed to get you there, is helpful in identifying the kinds of aggregate data you may need to amass to develop your case further. On the other hand, it is also normal to be left with questions or for data to be missing due to suppression. These gaps can point you in the next direction, helping you to determine if you need to keep digging now or if the missing data will inspire a new investigation in the future.

Example

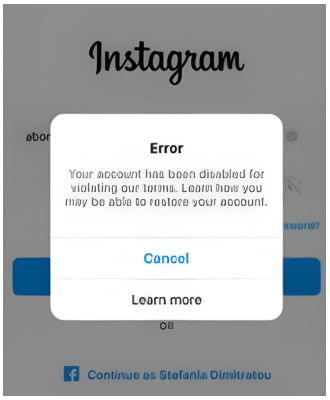


Figure 3: A screenshot of a takedown incident on WoW's Instagram page

Women on Web's main Instagram page was taken offline by Meta without much explanation. The screenshot shows all the information Meta provided to WoW after suspending the account. WoW had to appeal to get more information about the reason for the suspension.

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Phase 6: Tell Your Story

Once you have evidence, synthesize your timeline of events to best illustrate the narrative you're trying to convey. By making a case for how these patterns of bias and suppression impact your communities, you have a better understanding of how to move forward.

Key Questions:

- What is the story you're trying to tell?
- How does the evidence you have bolster and support your points?
- Does it illuminate different or new points of focus?
- What is the best way to tell this story?

Step 7: Share Your Story

Once you have your story, share it with your community. Evaluate the best channels in which to move your story. By sharing your own unique experiences, you can change these systems to better suit the needs of our communities.

Key Questions:

- Who are the audiences you would like to reach? Who needs to hear your story?
- Who are the people we need to contact to shed more light on our situation?
- How can we respond to minimize impacts felt by our community?
- What can we build to mitigate harms?

Helpful Steps

Some additional points to note to help you on your journey:

1. **Get support:** Knowledge or experience might not be available or accessible within your own team, so seek out those who can support you or your organization.
2. **Where to get support:** Build relationships with other groups who have done this work, such as digital rights organizations, researchers, or partners who are mission aligned.
3. **Budget, time, and planning:** Organize resources that are realistic for your group.
4. **Documenting is key:** If you have limited resources, any documentation you can produce is going to be helpful, even if you're unsure that you are looking in the right place.
5. **Consult with peers:** Discussing the best ways of framing your data story can be helpful in thinking about the strongest way you can make your case. Which points are most important? What best practices can you follow from those who do similar work?
6. **Vary your communication:** Do you have visual examples, such as graphs or images? Where or when can you use them? Sometimes data can be more striking as a visual – don't just tell, but show the evidence in ways that inspire action.







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