



## ► ILO Brief

### ► Responsible Tech

This third brief builds on the previous two by urging unions to responsibly deploy digital systems. Many common digital systems are privacy invasive. They often rely on the access to or collection of users' data which they then use to create numerous data-driven inferences. Both the datasets and the inferences can then be sold, or the rights to access them sold to other parties. If unions use these digital systems, they are essentially putting their members' data at risk of exploitation.

For unions to truly table an alternative digital ethos, it is pertinent that they critically deploy digital systems in line with the recommendations in the previous two briefs. If unions develop new apps or services, they must ensure in their contracts with the developers that the developers have no right to use and access the data for other purposes than to support the union, let alone sell the data onwards. If unions deploy existing systems, they must ask whether they are putting their members' data and thereby privacy and safety at risk. If so, should this tool at all be used? Accepting the use of systems that profit from inferring and selling members' data is the same as accepting that work and workers are becoming commodities that can be bought and sold.

#### **An alternative digital ethos**

Whilst changing systems and tools so only privacy preserving tools are used is a long-term strategy for many trade unions, some smaller steps can be made along the way to improve the protection of union data as well as to responsibly source worker data to improve the union's campaigning and organising. In this process some important questions need to be asked:

1. Are digital solutions the right ones for the purpose/goal of the current campaign or issue at hand.
  - Unions must avoid technological determinism – i.e. the belief that technology can solve every problem.
2. Who has access to the data that is generated and who controls it?
  - This is very important. If using a tool or system means that union members' data and privacy is jeopardized, is this then the right tool or system to use?
3. Inside the union, who has access to the data generated, what rights do they have over that data (can it be edited, deleted, downloaded)?
4. What policies can the union put in place to safeguard members' data against error, hacking, or other potentially harmful incidents?
5. How long should the data be stored? Can it be used for other purposes? And importantly, have the members whose data is extracted been informed about these purposes?
6. How can workers' rights and human rights be prioritised in all union data handling and processing?
7. Can unions explore the possibilities in moving out of Big Tech controlled cloud systems to union controlled decentralised servers. Whilst this is a long-term strategy it is absolutely worth aiming for. Reading the small print in Office365, Google Drive and/or Amazon Web Services reveals that they reserve the right to access all documents stored on their server.

These top-level questions are key to prevent unions themselves becoming hoarders of members' data. The tool Lighthouse which is described below is a helpful guide to good data stewardship.

### Examples of Responsible Tech

If digital technologies are perceived to be helpful and wanted, there are a number of tools and apps that prioritise privacy and responsible data handling. In the following we will introduce a few of these systems and tools.

The first batch of tools are so-called open-source. When an app is "open source," its 'source code' (i.e. the code that makes the program run) is publicly available and therefore also free of charge. This source code may be distributed, modified, and redistributed by any user (a union for example) according to their needs. The idea is that, if union developers can peek under the hood and tweak the way the program works, the app can become more attuned to union needs, useful for union campaigns and error-free over time. By adapting these systems, unions can ensure that the principles mentioned above can be actualised. Beware though, not all open-source systems are necessarily privacy-preserving!



The image shows the WeClock website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with the WeClock logo and links for Worker Collectives, Data Privacy, About, FAQ, and Contact. Below the navigation bar, there is a large banner featuring a smartphone displaying a map and a smartwatch showing a distance of 18 km. The banner text reads "GIVE WORK A REALITY CHECK" in large, bold, white letters on a blue background. At the bottom of the banner, there are buttons for "GET IT ON Google Play" and "Download on the App Store".

*WeClock - an opensource tool for workers and unions.  
www.weclock.it*

### WeClock – a means to sourcing worker data responsibly

Currently, those who hold the data are those that have the power to exert control over workers and the market. Essentially, they also have the power to determine the common narrative, and thereby perceptions of what



the "truth" is about working conditions, societal needs and the benefits of digital technologies. To break this power grab, unions could beneficially responsibly collect workers' data so they through campaigning and organising can offer an alternative narrative to the often corporate-defined one.

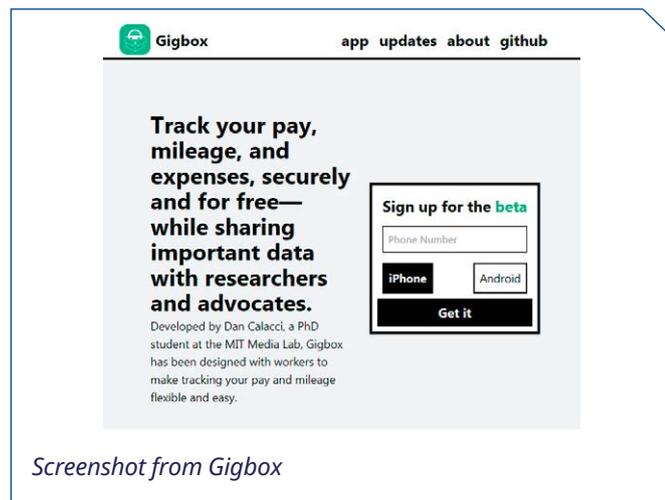
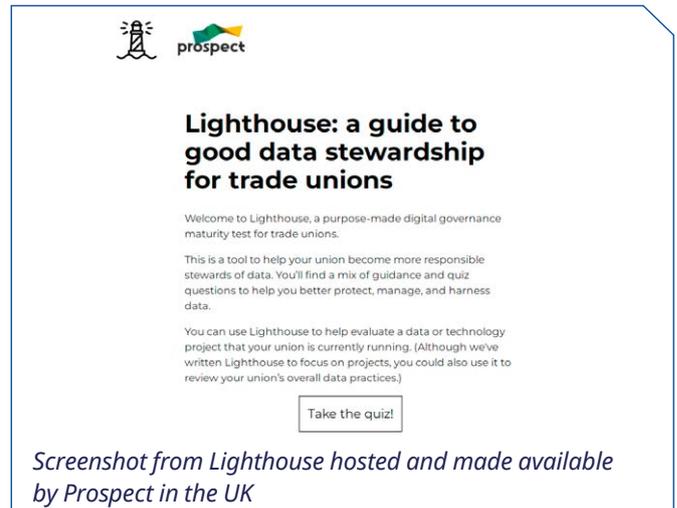
Developed by workers for workers, **WeClock** is an open-source app (code [here](#)). It works by tapping into the data that some of the 14 sensors on a mobile phone produce and gives the worker full control over that data. No other party has access to the data WeClock produces. WeClock is designed to help workers and their unions combat wage theft and promote worker wellbeing. For example, WeClock can help workers prove when they arrived at the workplace and left again. It can, for example, log app usage to help workers prove when they are using work apps – a helpful tool against the "always on" work culture. It can log location and movement to show how far workers commute or travel for work, where they are, whether they are on their feet or sitting down. Do they get breaks? Are they compensated for the time spent?

By logging when workers enter work and leave again, WeClock can support union campaigns on working time. With good data analysis and a group of workers' data, unions can begin the important journey of data storytelling pushing back on the employer-led or tech world led narratives that dominate much of our labour markets. WeClock can be used off-line and therefore also in geographies with high data costs and/or no internet coverage. A [union guide](#) for how to use WeClock in organising and campaigning is available too.

## Lighthouse - stewarding that data carefully

Collecting workers' data requires that unions know how to care and protect that data. To support unions in creating internal data stewardship policies and practices, [Lighthouse: a guide to good data stewardship for trade unions](#) – an opensource tool – can be of great help.

Lighthouse is designed to be used by union leaders and/or teams who are embarking on using digital tools to gather workers' data. It takes participants through a series of questions and themes and offers advice on how to ensure the union is collecting only the necessary data, is protecting it, and using it for the purposes defined with the workers.



## GigBox

GigBox was developed by Dan Calacci – a PhD candidate at the MIT Media Lab in cooperation with coworker.org. It aims to help workers collect + pool data about their experience to help them build power, help researchers understand the gig economy more fully, and help advocates more effectively plan for the future of work. GigBox is open source (see code [here](#)). One of GigBox's successes was to help gig workers fight back against a platform's pay algorithm. Using machine learning, GigBox could calculate whether workers were earning more, the same, or less than before the platform changed the algorithm. It turned out, contrary to the platform's claim, that 41% of workers were consistently paid less. Read more about the campaign and GigBox [here](#).

## Clean Insights



Unlike many website and app user tracking systems such as Google Analytics, [Clean Insights](#) focuses on assisting in answering key questions about web/app usage patterns without enabling an invasive surveillance of all user habits (code [here](#)). Clean Insights is built on 4 key principles:

1. DATA MINIMIZATION - Take only what you need  
Only the minimum amount of usage and behavioral data should be gathered to answer a determined set of questions. The frequency, range, and level of details of measurements should be as small as possible.

2. SOURCE AGGREGATION - No Needles, Only Haystack  
Possibly identifying data should not be held in any part of the system longer than necessary, aggregated at the source at the earliest possible time.
3. DETAIL GENERALIZATION - Dilute, Rinse, Repeat  
Dilute the attributes of data subjects by modifying the respective scale or order of magnitude (i.e. a region rather than a city, a month rather than a week)
4. ENGAGED TRANSPARENCY - Get Consent Early & Often  
Always get consent, and the scope of the data collection and algorithms used should be made publicly available and well explained.

With these strong principles Clean Insights is a really sensible alternative to the mainstream user-tracking systems that per definition track as many details about users as possible.

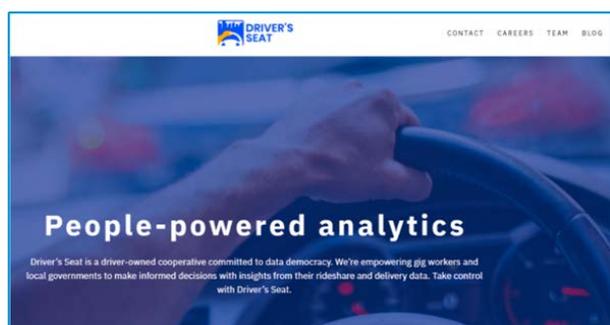
### Signal - safe messaging app

The first example of a responsible app and service that is not open source is Signal. Signal is almost identical to WhatsApp but with one very critical difference: It does not sell or in another way give 3rd parties access to user's data. Whilst WhatsApp is owned by Meta (Facebook) and Facebook has openly admitted to shifting data between its services, Signal is developed by a US non-profit charity organisation.



### Driver's seat - a gig worker data cooperative

Driver's Seat is a driver-owned data cooperative dedicated to leveling the playing field in the gig economy. Rideshare and delivery drivers use the mobile app and website to collect and share data and insights that help them earn more money and take control of their work. Driver's Seat uses aggregated data to help cities solve gig economy workforce and transportation problems. Revenue from data partnerships sustains the cooperative's mission and comes back to the members as dividends.



### Additional tools built for, or by, trade unions

In 2019, the Young Workers' Lab at UNI Global Union issued a report called [Connective Action](#). It lists tools built for, or by, the union movement as well as other handy systems unions could use.

### Reflections

One thing is clear, for unions across the world to successfully tackle the potential harms workers (and citizens) are subject to in the current digital environment, alternatives need to be pursued and tabled. The tools presented above aim to do just that. However, the challenges are many. Mainstream digital tools owned by large technology companies are designed to be very user friendly and are rapidly increasing their market share across the globe. In addition, in [Latin America](#) and many countries in [Africa](#), social media apps are bundled with mobile subscriptions making them free to use. They are thereby gaining enormous market share in developed and developing countries- and with that user data, making it harder for the more privacy preserving alternatives to penetrate the market.

Importantly, many of the largest tech companies are providing developing countries with internet access against winning the rights to the data. For example, Facebook's Free Basics app - a mobile app and web platform created by Facebook - has since its 2015 launch been hailed by the Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg as the "first step towards digital equality" due to its plan to "introduce" millions of people to the internet, many of whom live in developing countries. It provides free of data charges access to a variety of basic services like news, weather and health information, job ads, and of course, Facebook. While Facebook initially presented the project as philanthropy targeting unconnected rural communities, there are concerns over the full control of said data which remains with Facebook. After being banned in India, Free Basics has spread rapidly across Africa. In June 2020, Free Basics was live in 29 African nations and no longer available in 3 ([Democracy in Africa 2020](#)).

This table derived from Global Web Index's 2020 Social Media User Trends Report shows the countries with the highest number of WhatsApp users as a percentage of total internet users aged 16-64.

**Monthly WhatsApp users in 2021 as a percentage of total internet users aged 16-64, source 2020 Social Media User Trends Report**

Position	Country	% of WhatsApp users
1	Kenya	97%
2	South Africa	96%
3	Nigeria	95%
4	Argentina	93%
5	Malaysia	92%
6	Colombia	92%
7	Brazil	91%
8	Turkey	88%
9	Spain	88%
10	Indonesia	87%

**Recommendations**

It is clear that any trade union who wishes to prioritise the privacy and rights of their members is competing in a market dictated by a handful of large technology companies. However, steps can be taken towards a more responsible use of digital technologies. In sum these are:

- Choose union apps and services that have privacy and security at their heart.
- Negotiate, if possible, carefully around 3rd party access and control over members' data. This includes the developers of union apps and services.
- Create a union development plan that aims towards using digital technologies that are responsible and safeguard human rights and workers' rights.
- Start with considering carefully the use of WhatsApp and create a plan for transitioning to software which protects workers' data such as Signal.
- Raise the problems of mobile and app bundling both through campaigning as well as through social dialogue processes with governments. This is a defacto monopolisation of the market on digital telecommunication services that potentially is exploitative and anticompetitive.
- Work together through national and global federations to develop and deploy digital technologies built for workers and unions.
- On the longer term, explore the possibilities and benefits of the decentralised web and decentralised servers.