Ulrich Matter is assistant professor of economics at the Swiss Institute for International Economics and Applied Economic Research at the University of St.Gallen. He attained a PhD in economics from the University of Basel. Before joining the University of St.Gallen he was a Visiting Researcher at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University. His primary research interests lie at the intersection of data science, quantitative political economics, and online media economics.

Research Seminar: Econ Brown Bag

You are cordially invited to the following seminar
Wednesday, 26 May from 12:15 – 13:15hrs, ONLINE via ZOOM

Googling the 2020 US Elections

Search engines like Google play a central role in routing political information and news to citizens. In this paper, we test whether Google may promote filter bubbles and contribute to political polarization. For this purpose, we set up a field experiment based on 150 synthetic users ("bots") during the 2020 US Presidential Elections and its aftermath. These users were located in 25 cities across the United States and active from mid-October 2020 until mid-February 2021, which was arguably one of the most contested and politically sensitive periods in recent US history. The main innovations of our approach are two-fold: First, each user is assigned a set of ‘favorite’ websites and search terms in line with her political preferences (Republican, Democrat, or apolitical). They then build up a realistic, politically biased search history following a daily browsing behavior that combines searches for some websites that have the same political preferences with searches for politically neutral content. Second, we run many small experiments (1-3 a day) in which each user enters the same salient election-related search term. These experimental searches allow us to study the extent to which users were exposed to different search result pages in response to the same Google searches. Our results show that Google keeps users in their bubble and potentially contributes to political polarization by tilting search results towards previously visited websites (even though our users were not logged into a Google account) as well as by showing more liberal (conservative) search results to users from predominantly Democratic (Republican) cities. In contrast, we find no evidence that Google offers more liberal (conservative) search results to Democratic (Republican) users beyond the already known websites and the users’ location. As an illustration, think of a Democrat who lives in San Francisco and often visits the CNN website. Google may keep her in her filter bubble by often suggesting the liberal-leaning CNN website because of her browsing history and the website of the liberal-leaning San Francisco Chronicle because of her location, but not by disproportionately exposing her to liberal-leaning websites that she has never searched before and that are not particularly popular in her location.