

Digital Methods in a Searchable World: Research Ethics in the Age of Social Media

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ABSTRACT

In our contemporary society, groups, individuals, and organisations alike create and share large quantities of information online using social media. Though some of this data is necessarily a discourse in the public sphere, much of it is the substance of private conversations between individuals. The challenge for researchers is constructing appropriate ethical boundaries when 'social media brings together different social spheres, [making] a range of personal data from those spheres searchable and visible' (Trottier, 2011).

The public nature of online digital data on this new media (Zimmer, 2010) and its ease of accessibility, is often construed as permission for researchers to harvest and analyse these ready-made secondary data sets for research. Researchers' skills and knowledge can make them inclined to feel justified in repurposing this data for research purposes. Often, researchers do not see the need to obtain the kind of formal human -research -related ethical clearance they would otherwise need for such data gathering, raising ethical dilemmas, 'in particular the extent to which postings are considered public or private and the right to anonymity of those posting on social media. These issues are not clear-cut, for social media, by their nature, blur the boundary between public and private' (McKee, 2013).

There is also the issue of those being studied not being active consenting participants in the research process, as in traditional research methods. As such, researchers believe they avoid the so-called researcher bias by working with such 'pre-existing' data, though if the tables were turned, would researchers themselves be happy to have their social media data used by others without their permission? A further challenge is around anonymity, for every research participant has the right to anonymity, but every piece of digital social media data (even when posted anonymously) can be traced back to its source if it is not paraphrased (Eysenbach & Till, 2001); there is also the issue of users identifying other users. Nevertheless, many researchers use tweets *as-is* in their publications. Even when de-identified and anonymised, combining different data sets or variables can reveal identities in no time. This can compromise the aims of the research, and also undermine trust in the discipline. Informed consent is one way to deal with this issue (Lawson, 2004), but this does not help researchers who may be studying social justice issues and need to collect data around cyber racism, cyber sexism, cyber bullying etc. Seeking informed consent becomes problematic when it has a significant likelihood of altering the behaviour under observation (but we could argue that this is no different from other qualitative research), but when researching vulnerable communities online, taking steps to obtain consent can also introduce unintended stressors.

This paper will present some examples, case studies, and dilemmas from the authors' own research and offer a multi-faceted approach to deal with these issues: a combination of The Golden Rule (or the law of reciprocity), publishing guidelines, and also the development of best practice guidelines (or code of professional conduct) for digital social media research in Library and Information Science, especially as the majority of our research is around users and their information behaviours.

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