

Monday 21<sup>st</sup> of March, 2016,  
33 Finsbury Square, London. EC2A 1AG

## **Social Media & Social Science Research Ethics**

#SoMeEthics

### **Abstract Booklet:**

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## **Keynotes:**

**1: 1030-1130.**

### **The Ethical Disruptions of Social Media Research: tales from the field.**

**Prof. Susan Halford**, Director Web Science Institute, University of Southampton.

**Abstract:** Academic researchers currently find themselves at the centre of a perfect ethical storm: at a time when university ethical governance is becoming increasingly bureaucratised and risk adverse some extraordinary opportunities for research are emerging in new forms of digital data generated 'in the wild' and available 'in public' without any of the usual hallmarks of ethical credibility. New forms of data require a 'deep dive' into their ethical provenance and consequences but not fit easily into the principles currently promoted by institutional ethics processes. Drawing on the practical challenges of running a Centre for Doctoral Training in Web Science, this talk will explore these tensions and consider new practices that might bridge the gap.

**Bio:** Prof. Halford is a Geographer by training and an organisational sociologist by choice. Her recent research has focussed on the politics of digital data and artefacts. Susan is currently leading a team of sociologists working to develop new ethical guidelines for working with digital data for the British Sociological Association.

**2: 1600-1700**

### **Where next for #SocialEthics?**

**Steven Ginnis** (Head of Digital Research, Social Research Institute, Ipsos MORI) and **Harry Evans** (Research Analyst, Social Research Institute, Ipsos MORI).

**Abstract:** Navigating the contradictory world of social media ethics continues to be a difficult road for researchers. As part of the Wisdom of the Crowd project, Ipsos MORI made 19 recommendations to researchers, regulators and social media platforms on how best to embed ethics into every day social media research best practice. This presentation explores the primary and secondary research that underpinned the recommendations, and provides an initial assessment of progress in attempts to implement these practical, positive and sensible steps forward.

## **Parallel Session A: Ethical Practicalities (I)**

**1130-1300**

**Wasim Ahmed** (University of Sheffield), Peter Bath and Gianluca Demartini:  
Using Twitter as a data source: An overview of ethical challenges,

This paper reports on a methodologically unique PhD project which has been using Twitter data as a primary data source to gain a better understanding of how the Ebola outbreak of 2014 unfolded on Twitter (Ahmed & Bath, 2015a; Ahmed & Bath, 2015b).

We report on the decisions taken related to informed consent, copyright, potential participants, potential harm to participants, and data storage. We also report on some of the difficulties of using social media data in research in comparison to traditional social science datasets. By having reviewed existing literature and studies related to social media research ethics, we can synthesize material in order to examine best practice guidelines.

The project has disseminated information related to software which can be used to capture and analyse Twitter data (Ahmed, 2015). The project therefore, is in a unique position to outline common questions, difficulties, and challenges of using social media data for social science research.

One of the authors (WA) is the Twitter manager for the NSMNSS network and has coordinated Twitter chats on social media research ethics and is able to provide insight into some of the common concerns and how these have been overcome, or at least minimized when conducting research on social media.

Therefore, we present a case study of how social media data has been used successfully within a research project operating within ethical boundaries. We are additionally able to report on the common queries, difficulties, challenges, and successes of using social media data as shared within the NSMNSS network.

**Gill Mooney** (University of Leeds): Ethical issues in qualitative research on Facebook.

This paper will address the ethical concerns, problems and processes experienced during the development of methodology for a current PhD research project. The research seeks to understand how social class is known, understood, represented and enacted within the environment of Facebook. The project will make use of visual qualitative methods, incorporating content from Facebook users alongside focus group sessions and interviews.

Using Facebook as a subject of and site for research, through all stages from participant recruitment through to the use of shared Facebook content during fieldwork research encounters and publication presents a wide range of potential ethical issues. These must be navigated in order to produce rigorous and meaningful

data while protecting the interests of participants and remaining within the limits of what is legally and logistically feasible.

Three major issues encountered will be addressed in the paper with a view to stimulating discussion and thinking around potential approaches: Firstly, the exploitation, for research, of personal contacts within Facebook friendship networks and groups, and the corollary problems of ethics and reflexivity. Second, the challenges, including copyright, associated with reproducing Facebook's own page formats and content for research and publication purposes. Finally, the paper will consider the complex question of consent when qualitatively examining individuals' activities on Facebook, where they necessarily engage and interact with potentially a large number of others who are not participants in the research itself. Approaches to addressing these issues will be discussed, as well as lessons learned to carry forward into future research.

**Jenna Condie** (Western Sydney University (Co-Authors: Garth Lean and Brittany Wilcockson). **The Ethics of Researching Tinder.**

Since its launch in 2012, the location-based dating app Tinder has attracted significant attention and holds a firm place in the media spotlight. With an estimated 10 million global users daily and 26 million 'matches' every day, Tinder has become a prevalent site of online sociality that is ripe for social science research. Indeed, many research studies on Tinder are currently underway. It is therefore timely to consider the ways in which researchers are navigating this new ethical terrain. Like other social media platforms, Tinder raises the issues of informed consent, data ownership, and blurred boundaries between public and private space. However, given its primary use as a dating space, its location-based functionality, and its 'mobile-only' accessibility, Tinder presents a number of unique ethical challenges. This paper focuses on the ethical approach developed for using Tinder as a study context for exploring how social geo-tagging (or location-based) apps mediate travel experiences in the digital age. Tinder acts as an appropriate research site in this case due to the introduction of 'Passport', a feature of Tinder's premium service, which is central to its current market positioning and recent advertising campaigns. The 'Passport' feature enables users who are "planning vacations or business trips" to search for people who are in different locations (Tinder, 2015). The ethical approach developed resists the application of traditional research methodologies and facilitates an innovative research strategy to carry out research 'in', rather than 'on', Tinder.

## **Parallel Session B: Blurred Lines:**

**1130-1300**

**Sarah Quinton** (Oxford Brookes) and Nina Reynolds (University of Wollongong, Australia): 'Trying to re-focus the blurred lines between researchers and participants in social media research'.

The methodological opportunities offered by new technologies, including social media, go beyond just transferring traditional research approaches to the digital environment. However, with the increase in diverse methods facilitated by the advent and adoption of digital technology come new ethical questions for researchers. This paper recognises the impact of digital media on consumer and citizen behaviour and explores the blurred lines between the participant and the researcher in order to suggest a way forward for researchers. This blurring can be illustrated in the several ways. First, social media research may often start with a group such as an online community and then drill down to individual behaviours within that group so there exists an overlap of group and individual relationships. Second, the creation, augmenting and sharing of information between individuals and groups can smudge the edges of the original sampling frame. Third the increasing use of online participants to co-create or co-produce research instruments necessitates the question whether these individuals are being exploited. Fourth social media enables the accessing of new and 'hard to reach groups' who may have preferred to remain invisible. Fifth, the dilemma faced by researchers whether to identify themselves or lurk to prevent community de-stabilisation remains contentious. As clear strategies for the expected research norms within the social sciences domain have yet to be established for social media research, this paper contributes to moving the debate forward through deepening understanding of the questions that researchers need to consider when designing and implementing social media research.

**Kadian Pow** (Birmingham City University): Reconciling the Tumblr Fangirl and the Academic : Embracing the Blurred line Between Participant and Observer in Online Ethnography.

In late 2012, the US television show Scandal happened to me, which prompted me to seek out the show's fandom. Tumblr was the polyvocal media environment in which they had ensconced themselves. As blogger "katrinapavela", I traversed the serious, the sexy and the silly for nearly two years (11), until I started to think of making a dissertation out of the engagingly critical discourse about black femininity, desire and representation I continued to come across in the Tumblrshpere. Black women's fandoms and online intellectual spaces are under-researched (Warner, 2015: loc 732).

Now in the middle of outlining my methodological approach, I am embracing the blurred line as a liberating practise, away from the Positivist fiction of objective

epistemology (Anderson, 1989). Interpretation, not universal truth is all the researcher has (Andrews, 2010: 143). As a blogger, interpretation is also my main tool of analysis. I would like to discuss Engaged Ethnography as a methodology that compels critical reflexivity and constant accountability in critiquing my own ideological positions. It allows me to analyse my encounters in the research environment. I intend to use a public, critical exchange between a Tumblr user and myself as way of exploring the blurred line between blogger/researcher in social science.

**Milena Popova** (UWE): Things that keep me awake at night.

In this paper I will examine the practical and positional challenges of researching a community I have been part of for much longer than I have been a researcher. I will critically reflect on my dual role as both a fan and a researcher of online fandom and seek to offer practical insights on how to balance responsibilities to both communities.

The fanfiction community consists predominantly of women and non-binary people, a majority of whom identify as non-heterosexual. The community interacts in online spaces, and the focus of its activity is the production, sharing and enjoyment of amateur fiction based on existing commercial properties (TV, books, movies, etc.) Many of these stories are sexually explicit and involve non- heterosexual relationships. Both the challenging position of fanfiction in terms of copyright and societal norms around the expression of women's and queer sexualities have acted to keep this a niche community. My own involvement in fanfiction pre-dates my research by nearly two decades, giving me both privileged insight and a sense of loyalty to the community.

In my paper I will use examples from recent controversies over interactions between fans and researchers, as well as my own experience, to reflect on the challenges and opportunities presented by my dual role as a fan and researcher. I will argue that, if balanced carefully, these two roles are not contradictory and can in fact lead to better, more responsible research which benefits both fandom and academia.

## **Details of Special Workshop Session C**

**1130-1300**

### **Social Media Research Ethics: Sharing Best Practice.**

Workshop Conveners:  
Prof. Claire Wallace and Dr. Leanne Townsend (University of Aberdeen).

#### **Workshop Description:**

Social media platforms give social scientists access to huge pools of data, and research drawing on such data is becoming more commonplace. Whilst social media provides a valuable research opportunity, it also raises important questions in terms of how we conduct such research ethically. In this workshop, academics from the University of Aberdeen will share findings from their work on developing new ethical frameworks for conducting social media research. This presentation will include findings from in-depth interviews with scholars through the UK as well as social media users. We will then present a set of new ethical guidelines for social media research, which have been co-developed with key scholars working in the field.

Following the presentation, participants will be invited to discuss best practice in social media research, reflecting on their own experiences in the field. The discussion will consider key issues facing researchers working in this field: How do we conduct this kind of research? Who are our subjects and do we have their consent? How do we protect the anonymity of our subjects, particularly in relation to sensitive topics? How can we apply an ethical framework in different research contexts? The aim of the workshop is to share strategies for, and examples of best practice which participants can reflect on in their future social media research.

## **Parallel Session D: Critical Ethical Reflections:**

**1400-1530**

**Libby Bishop** (UK Data Archive, University of Essex): Sharing social media data – challenges and emerging solutions.

Two major trends in social research have been developing rapidly and while both hold great promise, there is friction between them. First, social media data are providing a rich source for research, offering features of scale and immediacy not possible with conventional methods (e.g., surveys and interviews). The second trend is growing data sharing and re-use, driven by funders' policies, publishers' requirements for access to data, calls for greater transparency, and the open data agenda (Corti et al. 2014). Traditionally, data sharing, especially for personal data, has been enabled by informed consent, often in conjunction with anonymisation. While both remain vital tools, characteristics of social media raise questions about their continuing effectiveness (Barocas and Nissenbaum 2014). Consent may be impossible for automatically collected data or impractical due to scale. User acceptance of terms and conditions is being deemed insufficient for valid consent (IPSOS-MORI 2015). (However, new possibilities exist for dynamic consent.) Data anonymisation is equally challenging, indeed it is prohibited by Twitter (Williams 2015). Repositories are key players in the data infrastructure, supporting re-use by protecting privacy, promoting transparency, etc. But social media alters repository-data creator relationships, arguably weakening repositories' capacity to provide these services. Several social media companies restrict sharing and re-use, making it impossible for researchers to satisfy requirements for data accessibility (Thomson 2013). Despite daunting challenges, data repositories, social media companies, and others are collaborating to develop practical solutions that integrate the benefits of research using social media data with insights from established practices of data curation.

**Harry T. Dyer** (UEA): Public vs Private: dichotomy or scale?

Using data and experiences as a researcher drawn from my ongoing PhD, this paper aims to discuss the issue of the public-private dichotomy. In particular, this paper will discuss how 'public' and 'private' are understood and negotiated by users of social networking sites (SNS), users expectations of public and private data, and how researchers can negotiate and approach this issue.

During my research, I found that my participants had specific understandings of public and private online, and negotiated these concepts and terms with expectations that differed from standard definitions of these terms. Many felt the need to make their profiles on a number of Social Networking Sites publicly accessible to any user, but also felt that this did not mean that their profiles would be viewed by everyone.

They understood that sites were likely to be viewed by 'specific' audiences whom they were tailoring their actions and interactions towards, despite the potential to be viewed by anybody. As such, they negotiated and dealt in 'specific' publics rather than a singular general public, and had expectations about what this meant for their data.

This discussion has ethical implications for researchers, particularly given the recent popularity of 'big data' which often assumes that public data is acceptable to utilise for research without informed consent. Though this may technically be the case, this paper argues that informed consent is crucial for online data, as participants often do not view their public data to have been created for researchers to utilize but for 'specific' publics.

**Elvira Perez Vallejos** (Nottingham): iRights Youth Juries.

Promoting critical discussions, reflections and digital deliberations about internet dilemmas among children and young people is crucial for improving ethical practices and desirable online behaviour. At school, children and young people are constantly bombarded with internet safety programmes and interventions that rather focus on the risks and potential harm inherent on internet (e.g., digital footprint) and less on data privacy, algorithm bias or cookies. In order to improve ethical practices among children and young people we have developed the iRights Youth Juries, an innovative methodology for promoting digital literacy as well as a critical attitude to the internet while providing technical knowledge and exploring online youth concerns.

These juries are an efficient and engaging tool that can be exported to other contexts and populations (e.g., business, academia, general public) to facilitate critical ethical reflections. Due to its focus on co-construction, the scenarios that are being dramatized and 'put on trial' are co-developed with the jury (e.g., participants) and therefore are sensitive to different cultures and situations.

This presentation illustrates the main recommendations derived from a series of iRights Youth Juries held in London, Leeds and Nottingham with 12 to 16 years old developed in collaboration with the iRights coalition, Leeds University and Horizon at Nottingham University.

## Parallel Sessions E: Ethical Practicalities (II)

1400-1530

**Paulina Ruiz (Bristol):** Gaining access to online interactions from an offline perspective: Ethical challenges faced in a study with Chilean adolescents.

This paper aims to present and discuss some key ethical decisions that took place during a 4-months fieldwork in Chile. This is part of an ongoing ethnographic case study on the use of mobile phones by adolescents in two schools. The main objective of this research is to better understand how teenagers interact with peers through the use of mobiles in order to produce their identities as students and young people in the school setting, and how school culture constrains and enables these practices.

The main research interest is to discuss on the relationship between youth digital culture and school culture. In order to do so, as a participant observer I positioned myself in the school offline setting. In this role, one of the biggest challenges I faced was how to gain access to the participants' online interactions with their peers while spending time with them at schools.

The presentation will focus on how this challenge was managed due to personal assumptions and cultural constraints. I will present on the process of gaining access to adolescents' daily use of mobiles at schools, the application of methods to collect data on their use of mobiles and social media (student-collected online dialogues & diary), and how social media unexpectedly became a key research communication tool itself.

**Cathy Ure (Salford):** The ethics of 'informed consent' and the waiving of anonymity: Analysing blog texts of breast cancer bloggers' lived experiences.

Whilst many contend blogs are publicly available data and permission to use them is unnecessary (Sudweeks & Rafaeli, 1995; Walther, 2002), I argue that as an 'ethical' researcher working with 'social' digital data, due consideration needs to be given on an ongoing basis to the 'subject' under discussion. In research exploring how women blog about their experiences of 'cancer survivorship', informed consent was sought to analyse blogs from the bloggers themselves, given the sensitive nature of the blog content available online. Challenges in gaining access to blogs led to a 'case study' of one breast cancer blog from which 13 blog posts with comments, purposively sampled using tags, were discursively analysed. An inductive approach to ethical decision making was required as issues related to 'ethics in practice' (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) emerged in relation to:

- i) The provision of consent, subject to the blogger being given 'proper credit' for any quotes used; the implications for 'consent' from blog commenters, and for dissemination of research findings

- ii) The blogger's understanding of the data analysis approaches and the meaning of 'informed' consent.

This presentation explores these ethical challenges encountered in this discursive analysis of personal blogs written by women living with and beyond breast cancer. How these issues were addressed and key learning points for researchers are discussed. The difficulties encountered with obtaining informed consent signal that social science researchers should be mindful that blog content may not be considered publicly available data by their authors.

**Ansgar Koene (Nottingham):** Public attitudes to reported instance of personal data usage #AnalyzeMyData.

In order to explore public attitudes towards the use of data from online services (e.g. social media) or digital devices (e.g. mobile phone GPS), we are running a Twitter based campaign (#AnalyzeMyData) in which we reminded people of instances of data usage that have been reported in news stories and asked them to rate if they considered these data uses to be OK. In order to produce momentum of public participation we designed the experiment as a sustained campaign in which a different news item is presented each day over a period of multiple weeks. Each Tweet includes a link to a mini-survey which asks participants to respond, 'yes', 'no' or 'depends'. To further motivate continued participation as the campaign progresses, we provide a running update on our website of the response statistics to the items that were previously Tweeted. The types of data usage included in the campaign range from academic studies of social media use, to data collection for product development, marketing and government studies. Our hope is that this campaign/experiment will 1) help to raise awareness of the various ways in which personal data, acquired through online services of digital devices, is currently being used, and 2) provide a large dataset of case-studies with an associated baseline of public acceptance/rejection that can be used for future research ethics guidelines and review training.

## **Special Panel Session F.**

**1400-1530**

### **Ethical Challenges for Visual Social Media Research: Are Images Different?**

This panel brings together three researchers from the Visual Social Media Lab (<http://visualsecialmedialab.org/>) to discuss some of the ethical challenges and considerations they have faced during their most recent projects when working with social media images using different methods. These three examples will be used to discuss the ways in which ethical practice can be adapted to suit the new challenges faced by social media researchers. They also form the basis for the Visual Social Media Lab's 'manifesto' (describing a series of tough ethical scenarios and provide up to date advice informed by practice), which is intended to offer some new perspectives on online data gathering and analysis, as well as developing a user-friendly interface for the tailoring of ethical guidance.

**Farida Vis** is Director of the Visual Social Media Lab, Research Fellow in the Information School at the University of Sheffield and will present on the Lab's most recent publication: *The Iconic Image on Social Media: A Rapid Research Response to the Death of Aylan Kurdi*.

**Anne Burns** is Research Associate on the 'Picturing the Social' project and researcher the Visual Social Media Lab, and will present on her ethnography of online photo sharing practices, which has been exploring how notions of place and identity are expressed and negotiated through the use of photography on social media.

**Alexandra Boutopoulou** is a PhD student in the Visual Social Media Lab and will discuss her new project, which is part of the 'Big Data and Food Safety' network, a collaboration with the Food Standards Agency.