Social media research: ethics issues & guidance v1

Key terms

Social media: Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Snapchat, Reddit, TikTok, forums, chat rooms, blogs etc.

Data:
- From *created* content, e.g. (micro)blogs, comments, images videos.
- From *engagement*, e.g. likes, shares, retweets, followers, friends.
- From *tracking* participants, e.g. location.

Guidance documents consulted[1]

- British Psychological Society (BPS). *Ethics guidelines for internet-mediated research*. 2021.
- Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). *Internet-mediated research*. n.d.
- franzke, aline shakti, Anja Bechmann, Michael Zimmer, Charles Ess and the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR). *Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0.* 2019.
- National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH). *A Guide to Internet Research Ethics*. 2019.
- Townsend, Leanne and Claire Wallace. *Social Media Research: A Guide to Ethics*. 2016.
- The University of Sheffield. *Research Ethics Policy Note no. 14, Research Involving Social Media Data*. n.d.

General philosophical issues

- Social media users = human participants (Sheffield).
- Key: user perceptions, (reasonable) expectations, attitudes (Sheffield; BPS; NESH).
- Internet communication covers private (home) and public (forum) locations simultaneously (BPS); 'not all info openly available online is public' (NESH).
- Public nature 'should always be critically examined' and identity protected where appropriate (ESRC); plus consider digital fingerprints / tracking (NESH).
- Key factors: accessibility, sensitivity, vulnerability, interaction (NESH).

IPSOS MORI, 2015 UK study (URL)

- 38% are aware that social media data is shared for research.
- 60% think such sharing should not happen.
- 74% prefer to be anonymous in research.
- 54% agree on right to anonymity.

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[1] Ethical codes listed on the page 'Internet and social media research in BMS': link

Context and culture

Cultural differences include contextualising frameworks (AoIR):
- European (Scandinavian, e.g. NESH): deontological, 'dignity, freedom, autonomy, solidarity, equality, democracy and trust'.
- US / UK (e.g. BPS): utilitarian, 'greater good for the collective and society in general'.

Values in tension
- Individual autonomy vs relational selfhood; vulnerability of individuals and communities.
- Virtue ethics, feminist ethics (of care): beyond ethical obligation / compliance, e.g. community benefits.

Privacy settings
- Terms and conditions, inc. 'third party use', but does that means it is 'public'?
- Online content is not static, e.g. T&C changes, pages archived (BPS)[2].
- What about *informed* consent? *N.b. Legislation ≠ ethics*.
- Consider different ways people use the internet, and the full range of impacts, e.g. roles of anonymity, play, choice[3]; issue of filter bubbles[4]; risks of public shaming, bullying, cancelling[5]; potential impacts, e.g. trolling[6] and doxing[7].

Some key (ethical) questions and principles to consider:

- Is there a reasonable expectation of privacy?
- Does deletion of a post = withdrawal of consent?
- Can you fully anonymise data searchable online?
- Is there a risk of harm (embarrassment, reputational damage, prosecution)?
- Is a participant willing and of sound mind (inc. when they posted)?
- Can you be sure you've understood (accuracy), e.g. between: serious vs. irony/humour; ranting vs. sincere beliefs?
- Can you be sure they are who they say they are?
- *Flexible principles for various contexts, platforms, populations, topics, methodology, data; responsibility remains with researcher & ethics committee (assuming latter are well informed & not misled) (Townsend and Wallace, 2016).*
- *Key is reflective, dialogical processes; ethical judgments with reasons (AoIR).*

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[2] Cf. https://europa.eu/youreurope/business/dealing-with-customers/consumer-contracts-guarantees/consumer-contracts/index_en.htm

[3] Burkitt, I. (2008) *Social Selves: Theories of self and society*. London: Sage.

[4] Pariser, E. (2011). *The filter bubble: What the Internet is hiding from you*. London: Penguin.

[5] Ronson, J. (2016). *So you've been publicly shamed*. NY: Riverhead Books.

[6] Phillips, W. (2015). *This is why we can't have nice things: Mapping the relationship between online trolling and mainstream culture*. Mass.: Mit Press.

[7] Eckert, S., & Metzger-Riftkin, J. (2020). Doxxing. *The international encyclopedia of gender, media, and communication*, 1-5.