University Research Ethics Committee's guidance on the use of social media in research

Introduction

This guidance is designed to inform researchers and ethics committee members about some of the potential ethical implications arising from the use of social media in research. For the purposes of this guidance a broad definition of social media is adopted, encompassing a range of different platforms and networks. The term social media (sometimes referred to as Web 2.0) is an 'umbrella label' that covers a broad range of internet and web-based sites and services that connect individuals and groups (some free, others more commercial), for example *Facebook*, *Twitter, Flickr* and *Linked-In*.

The rapidly growing use of social media has contributed to a change in cultural mind-set for researchers. In this fast-moving environment, social media enables users to create, control and share their own content. There are various types and uses of social media relevant to research. The key feature of social media research is that it connects individuals and involves 'interaction' both with the website/interface itself and with other visitors. This communication can be concurrent, e.g. text, voice, video-link (synchronous) or the interaction can take place a different times, e.g. by email (asynchronous), it may involve public and/or private interaction between individuals and groups (using mediums such as Twitter) raising issues such as whether an exchange might then become available to others through retention of data.

The rapidly changing landscape of social media 2012-2015

Changes in social media landscape and technology mean that previous differences between function and use of platforms have become less distinct. Improvements to smart phones and range of new smart devices also change ways that social media is accessed. For example there is no longer a distinction between desk/laptops/tablet/s smart phones for different platforms. This has implications for how data can be accessed. There is an emergence of new transient or time-limited social media sites (e.g. Snapchat) which poses new challenges and ethical issues for researchers.

The following diagrams illustrate the growing social media landscape:

Social Media Landscape 2012

Updated model for 2015

Social Media Landscape 2015

Key Ethical Questions

UREC and the FRECs do not make any judgement about the methodological advantages and disadvantages of deploying social media rather than more 'traditional' research tools. There may be benefits to using social media as part, or all of a project's methodology. These include accessibility, responsiveness, speed, cost, and efficiency. Disadvantages may arise around the lack of researcher control, lack of face-to-face dynamics, and the exclusion of certain types of potential participants. From a research ethics perspective there is no particular barrier to deploying social media in research; as with any application for ethical approval what is important is that any ethical issues are clearly recognised and addressed.

The following questions are indicative of some of the issues that researchers intending to use social media may wish to consider. These questions should be addressed in any application for ethical approval for projects involving the use of social media in the research design:

Place, Platform & Time

- Where is the research to take place?
- Where are the researchers based?
- What IT facilities are they using?
- Where will any gathered data be stored?
- How and when will collected data be destroyed?
- Are there any ethical considerations arising from choice and nature of the platforms?
- Is the research using data already in the public domain or social media data with restricted access?
- Unless all data is already in the public domain informed consent will need to be obtained from the research participants.

Informed Consent

A central issue in relation to any research using human participants (including those on social media) is to ensure appropriate measures are in place to ensure informed consent will be obtained before the research takes place. This question can be difficult for research involving social media.

General ethical principles and UWE's requirements for seeking ethical approval for projects mandates that, unless consent has been sought, observation of public behaviour needs to take place only where people would **'reasonably expect to be observed by strangers'**.

This requirement essentially vetoes observation in public spaces where people may believe that they are *not* likely to be observed. An obvious example may be public changing rooms, or gyms. The same principles apply to research from social media sources.

Researchers should demonstrate respect for participants' expectations of privacy and consider the extent to which observations may have potentially damaging effects for participants even where online data can be considered in the public domain. In all other

circumstances valid consent is needed where it cannot be argued that online data can be considered in the public domain.

Even where websites or social media platforms seek to disclaim responsibility for the privacy of its users, researchers must be aware that it is usual for individuals to access web sites without reading instructions, explanations or terms and conditions. Participants may therefore nominally have 'consented', but although *consent* is provided it is not *informed consent*.

For anonymised-at-source non-sensitive data, consent may be considered to have been given by the act of participation or by ticking a box for example. However, if anonymised-at-the-source data covers sensitive topics such as sexual behaviour clear and specific consent processes will be required.

In deciding whether informed consent can be considered to have been obtained, the questions that need to be thought through in the research design should include:

- Establishing whether the data can reasonably be considered in the public domain;
- Other than where this is the case, how are research participants to be made aware that they are involved in academic research?
- How will consent be obtained?
- How will a Participant Information Sheet be provided?
- How can participants withdraw from the research?
- Can their contributions be removed and/or returned to them?
- If any of the above are impracticable, can 'tacit consent' be assumed, e.g. from the fact of participation?

Confidentiality & Privacy: FAQs

- If desired, can the identity or plural identities ('physical' or virtual) of research participants be kept confidential?

    o Researchers should be aware that is impossible to maintain complete confidentiality of participants because the researcher is not in charge of the network/social media platform. For example, law enforcement bodies may have a statutory right to request access to the data.

- Will it be possible to guarantee privacy?

    o Internet communication is often more visible, traceable and with greater permanence, so it may not be definitively possible to guarantee privacy. However, all efforts should be made to allow for this.

- Is it possible to maintain a distinction between 'private' and 'public' spaces?

    o It is arguable postings to discussion groups do not automatically count as public activity. When constructing research using discussion groups, any

requirement for consent by participants obviously needs to be tempered by a consideration of the nature of the research, the intrusiveness and privacy implications of the data collected, analysed and reported, and possible harm that could be caused by the research.

- How 'traceable' is the data by non-researchers and non-participants?

  - Researchers should avoid using quotes that are traceable by typing it into a search engine unless the participant has fully consented. The researcher should consider the use of pseudonyms and paraphrasing of quotes to address this. If direct quotations are necessary, then consent of those sampled should be sought.

- Are there any potential means of identification of individual participants by means of linking (or disaggregation) of publicly available data sets created by others?

  - Sometimes when anonymised datasets are aggregated it is possible to re-identify a participant. Where de-identified datasets are being used without the consent of the original subject of the data (for example, many sources of government data that are available online are using data collected for one purpose by State agencies and making this data available, including to researchers. In this instance there is no consent from the original data subjects and therefore if there is a danger of data-linkage making re-identification possible careful consideration of the ethical dimensions and the need to gain informed consent from such potential participants must be considered).

Transparency/covert research

This type of research is not confined to social media methodologies, however social media technology makes covert research possible in new ways. If covert research is part of the project design, how is this justified?

- For example projects where research aims and objectives signal clear contribution to the 'greater good'. However, the ethical considerations must be given a high priority. Caution should be exercised and strong justification will need to be provided in the ethical approval application, together with a risk assessment.

- Will the researcher adopt a pseudonym or 'alternative identity' (e.g. an avatar)? Does this pose any additional risks to the researcher or the participants?

Anonymity & Authenticity

All reasonable efforts should be made to ensure the highest level of anonymity possible unless specific consent has been obtained for identifying information to be made public.

Particular attention should be given to the following issues:

- Is interaction between participants possible 'outside' the research setting? This may skew the research and needs to be taken into account in the project design.

- Might it be possible for somebody to participate in research in order to identify other participants for contact outside of that context? How can this be mitigated in the project design?

- Can the identity and social characteristics (age, gender, etc.) of research participants be verified? For example, what if a child lies about their age and pretends to be an adult?

- Direct quotations should only be used where explicit consent has been obtained.

- How can the contribution of research participants be properly acknowledged?

Protection of participants

Are there any risks for participants? The researcher should be clear about the extent to which their own collection and reporting of data obtained from the internet would pose additional threats to privacy over and above those that already exist.

Researchers should take appropriate actions towards harm minimisation such as removing authors name and @tag etc.

Particular consideration should be given to whether particularly vulnerable participants may be involved and how will their safety and wellbeing be assured? For example, research involving social media groups who support victims of crime or children. Is it possible to identify any vulnerable participants? If so, how can this be overcome in the research design?

Data management, storage, security and copyright

Particular attention needs to be paid to data issues in the project design and application for ethical approval. The project needs to ensure adequate data management, storage, security and copyright provisions are in place regardless of the source of the data obtained. Some relevant questions in designing a project using social media data will be:

- Will the contributions of research participants be shared? If so, with whom and how will dissemination be controlled to ensure anonymity of participants?
- What are the implications of the research design for data storage and security? Does the research design comply with UWE's IT policies? These policies are available at: http://www1.uwe.ac.uk/its/itpolicies.aspx
- Do the data arrangements comply with the Data Protection Act 1998, and from March 25, 2018 with the provisions of the General Data Protection Regulations? UWE's data protection policy is available at: http://www1.uwe.ac.uk/its/itpolicies/dataprotection.aspx
- Who owns the information collected for the research?
  - Information posted on a social media platform, even if originally intended for private use can be made public by the company.

- Can owners of platforms retain the data?
- Is there a need to protect research findings or are these intended to be publicly accessible?
- Can the researcher control the data and the dissemination of findings or do they relinquish control at any stage?
- Is it envisaged that conference presentations might be immediately disseminated through photo sharing and tweeting using the conference hash tag? See for example:
  http://www.guardian.co.uk/higher-education-network/blog/2012/oct/03/ethics-live-tweeting-academic-conferences

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