"I love thinking about ethics!"
Perspectives on ethics in social media research

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Introduction

The topic of research ethics has been a very important one in Internet research since its beginnings (Ess 2014) and for the interdisciplinary AoIR community in particular. In 2012 the AoIR published version 2.0 of its seminal "Recommendations from the AOIR ethics working committee" (Markham and Buchanan 2012; Ess 2002). In their recommendations, the authors recognized that because the objects of study in Internet research, namely the Internet and its various technologies and user groups, are both complex and ephemeral, so that rules and guidelines also necessarily cannot be static. The report further acknowledges the "complexity of ethical decision making in individual cases" (Markham and Buchanan 2012: 3), the fact that there are many possible ethical issues that can arise for Internet researchers, that there are many grey areas in ethical decision making, and that multiple underlying ethical frameworks (Ess 2014) may be applicable simultaneously. Therefore the report advocates "guidelines rather than a code of practice so that ethical research can remain flexible, be responsive to diverse contexts, and be adaptable to continually changing technologies."

Generally, with new media and internet technologies, there is a "lack of standardized practices" (Rooke 2013) with regards to research ethics. Decisions often have to be taken relying on one's individual sense of ethical obligation, as rules or standards are insufficient or were not created with internet data in mind (Shapiro and Ossorio 2013; Kinder-Kurlanda and Erwein Nihan 2013). Some claim that this lack of ethical guidance can stymie research on social networks in particular, "potentially rendering academia irrelevant to an important domain of human activity" (Shapiro and Ossorio 2013).

Despite such difficulties the field of social media research is growing fast, with the number of papers featuring either "Twitter" or "Facebook" in their title being four times larger in 2012 than in 2008[1]. Social media researchers have obviously found ways to deal with arising ethical dilemmas despite "little specific guidance in the literature" (Henderson et al. 2013), even calling to empower researchers and extending their role in the process of finding ways to deal with ethical dilemmas as they "believe that ethical research committees cannot, and should not, be relied upon as our ethical compass as they also struggle to deal with emerging technologies and their implications" (Henderson et al. 2013).

In this paper we build on these observations and explore how the field of social media research ethics plays out in practice. We show how current research practices influence social media researchers' thinking about ethics and detail some concrete questions that arise in social media research. Our intention in this paper is therefore a) to show how the adapting of guidelines plays out and what the

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[1] Elsevier's Scopus lists 508 publications featuring either "Twitter" or "Facebook" in their title in 2008 and 2,171 with the same criteria in 2012.

resulting individual strategies look like b) to shed some light on social media researchers' stances and opinions on the issue of ethics in social media research, and c) to offer these insights with the intent to allow other social media researchers to learn from these examples. This paper therefore presents results from qualitative interviews that show the different ways in which social media researchers deal with ethical concerns in their research.

Method

Exploring the issues social media researchers currently face in dealing with social media data and understanding their motivations both require asking these researchers for detailed explanations and exploring meanings and contexts. We therefore decided on the qualitative approach of conducting face-to-face, semi-structured interviews[2]. Following this approach we have so far conducted 35 interviews with social media researchers at three different conferences (with different disciplinary foci). This paper presents preliminary insights into a set of twenty interviews which represent the first phase of our project. These interviews were all conducted in October 2013. Our interviewees in this phase could not yet reflect upon the prominent paper[3] by Facebook researchers which – due to the implementation of experiments without obtaining users' consent – inspired various discussions in the research community in June 2014[4].

The twenty interviewees were social media and mobile communication researchers working in Europe, the United States or Australia. Interviewees ranged from PhD students to professors in terms of professional levels. Most interviewees had experiences with research on social media data from several platforms. In addition to having conducted various research projects on social media, thirteen researchers had specifically based research on data gathered from Twitter before, ten on blog data, five on data from Facebook, and many had also gathered or analyzed other data from platforms such as Foursquare, Tumblr, 4chan or reddit.

Results and discussion

Interviewees highlighted that working with data gathered from social media constitutes a new context for research ethics and methodologies. Standard practices, e.g. asking for participants' consent, are no longer feasible when working with big datasets, resulting in statements such as: "I don't think that we can just use the same kind of tools and conceptual frameworks that have been developed so far." Many had very different ways of relating to research subjects – who would in interview-based research become participants in the project who the researcher would not only ask for consent but often also discuss results with. Some researchers thought that even if consent could be obtained (e.g. through Facebook apps) this had to be handled carefully because users might not be aware of what they were consenting to.

Social media research is itself a broad and diverse field, and consequently the situation for research ethics is complex and diverse, too. All interviewees showed a high awareness of this complexity and all had at some point considered ethical issues (with differing levels of enthusiasm: While one claimed to "love thinking about ethics", another said: "I wouldn't necessarily say that I'm so concerned about privacy per se."). In some cases strategies had been developed in situ during the research process, so that interviewees already had found practical solutions for their specific research context. Yet, these reflections rarely found their way into more traditional publication formats with ethics becoming a

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[2] This paper is part of a broader project on social media research practices, and interviews therefore included questions on different dimensions of dealing with data from social media, including practical and methodological challenges, research environments, and ethical and legal issues.
[3] Kramer, A. D. I., Guillory, J. E., and Hancock, J. T. 2014. Experimental evidence of massive-scale emotional contagion through social networks. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 111 (24), 8788–8790.
[4] A collection of direct responses by researchers to the "Facebook experiment" has been prepared by http://laboratorium.net/archive/2014/06/30/the_facebook_emotional_manipulation_study_source (last accessed August 14, 2014).

"hidden topic" in social media research. And the many decisions researchers make day by day about how to handle user data within their projects cannot be accessed by reading the resulting research papers.

Research practices would either (a) differ fundamentally with regards to general assumptions e.g. about privacy and publicity of social media data or, (b) vary more subtly in terms of practical realization of e.g. anonymization strategies. On the first fundamental level, we found different assumptions about whether to treat social media data as deliberately public communication. While some considered Twitter entirely public ("I, for example, have decided that to me Twitter is public communication, totally public") others worried about people not expecting to become research subjects ("if something is public this doesn't mean that the author is ok with you doing research on that specific content"). Many interviewees considered Twitter to be less critical in terms of ethical issues than Facebook. Conversely, some researchers felt protected by the fact that privacy was very central to the Facebook system, so that researchers could usually assume that public posts were meant to be public. Researchers also raised the issue that anonymization was hard to achieve. This assessment aligns with prior findings e.g. by Zimmer (2010) on re-identifying anonymized data in Facebook research. Changing user names often did not suffice: "Because when you got a large amount of information, you know, personal information, networks, kind of movies you like, places you've been, friends you've got, it's so easy to know who you are, even if I don't know your name." This was seen as less of a problem with Twitter as "communication networks don't say a lot about your own online identity" while friendship networks on Facebook do. Less popular social media services can be different still, though researchers expected a general rise in awareness of being publicly visible when online.

The different views resulted in practical implications, for example, tweets would be quoted ("I think it [qouting] is a very important part of analysis to make people reflect on what they are doing in the public sphere, and Twitter is public sphere") or not ("I will not quote tweets."). Situations were often considered to be unproblematic from an ethical point of view if only public figures (e.g. organizations, politicians) and deliberately publicized content was studied. However, we also found exceptions from these views, e.g. researchers arguing for recognition of social media users as authors: "if somebody plays a really important role in a particular event then maybe they deserve the credit of being accredited as well." Researchers reported quoting tweets that had been retweeted beyond a certain threshold – assuming that the tweet and the user had achieved a new level of public-ness through having been retweeted multiple times. Others pointed out that studying very big datasets made individuals mostly invisible: "There we are, aggregating to a point where it is impossible to actually identify from what we are publishing. It's impossible to identify individual users." Some researchers tried to re-identify users from quoted tweets to test for anonymity – with differing results, some being able to trace back usernames via Google, others not.

Finally, some user groups were perceived as particularly vulnerable, requiring even more careful practices, for example religious groups or activists. Distinguishing between public and non-public figures was therefore seen as more of a general guideline rather than as a blanket rule. Solutions to ethical issues were generally perceived as dependent on the situation and the context. Standard rules would be difficult to define and then difficult to follow because the field was constantly changing. Some proposed that standards should be on a different level altogether: "So that would be the standard: always reflect on it." Every researcher should devote attention to the issues and 'think this through'.

While most researchers reported having eventually been successful in finding adequate solutions to ethical dilemmas in their research, it also became clear that some issues remained unsolved or at least warranted further discussion and research. In addition to the issues of user consent this particularly pertained to other issues of propagating practices that, although legal and widespread, were ethically questionable, e.g. participating in spreading meme images. One interviewee pointed out that researchers may come across content that has been re-distributed by users without notifying the original content creator, for example "you could have an image on your Facebook that somebody who goes to reddit or 4chan or tumblr sees and puts a caption on and puts there kind of without your

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consent. (...) And then here I am as a researcher propagating that by putting a billion of you in my paper".

Conclusion and outlook

To summarize, in this paper we have shown that

    a) strategies to ethics in social media are complex, differ in often subtle ways, and sometimes aim to achieve different or even contradictory goals (e.g. personal privacy vs. recognition of authoring);

    b) researchers solve ethical dilemmas individually and value flexible approaches to research ethics while showing concern for problematic phenomena such as working on the basis of unclear user consent or propagating the unwanted and uncontrollable spread of private images;

    c) some ethical problems re-occur on various platforms and solutions have been found that are transferable, e.g. thinking about users' intentions when posting.

Researchers take responsibility for the ethical dilemmas that can occur in social media research and individual approaches are often successful in finding solutions that are tailored to specific contexts. General rules or standards might be difficult to adhere to considering the number and complexity of possible ethical dilemmas and also potentially cannot cope with the pace of development of underlying technologies, usage ways and platform designs.

In accordance with the view that researchers have and should have an important role in identifying ethical problems we also recognize that "there is a need for further research on the beliefs and expectations of those using social media in relation to how their material might be used in research" (McKee 2013) and of research into users' views on authorship, privacy and copyright issues.

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