Social Media, Social Science & Research Ethics

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Capella University Core Faculty, Researcher, Writer & Consultant through Vision2Lead. Author, *Online Interviews in Real Time and Cases in Online Interview Research.*
New Social Media, New Social Science - Blurring the boundaries?

- Network of methodological innovation
- Funded by NCRM
- May 2012-May 2013

Innovation
Collaboration
Inspiration
Fresh thinking
Aims of the network

- On & off line community of practice
- Forge links between academics, practitioners & across disciplines
- Catalyse debate - address challenges social media present for social science research
- Share approaches, tools & experiences of using social media
- Identify good practice: co-created content & guidance to be shared with the wider community
20 disciplinary fields

58% female
42% male

76% employed
34% students

461 members

75% HE sector
25% other

65% in UK
35% worldwide

Experience of social media research

- Beginners 41%
- Some experience 45%
- Experts 14%
How it works?

Network activities across a range of platforms:

- **Home page:** [http://www.natcen.ac.uk/nsmnss/](http://www.natcen.ac.uk/nsmnss/)
- **Methodspace:** [http://www.methodspace.com/group/nsmnss/forum](http://www.methodspace.com/group/nsmnss/forum)
- **Twitter:** @NSMNSS, #NSMNSS
- **Blogs:** [http://nsmnss.blogspot.co.uk/](http://nsmnss.blogspot.co.uk/)
- **You Tube:** [http://www.youtube.com/user/NSMNSS](http://www.youtube.com/user/NSMNSS)

- **Face to face events**
12 months...

3 online seminars

7 themed twitter chats

66 blog posts

4 knowledge exchange seminars

2 conferences

1,194 video views on YouTube

37,761 blog page views

Over 5,322 minutes of video watched
Ethical issues in social media research

Persisting uncertainty ‘getting it right’ ethically

- Ethical dilemmas - lack of consistent, relevant guidance, conflicting opinions
- What are the key political, ethical, legal issues?
- Are they different for online to offline research?
- Do we understand the digital world well enough to make these choices?
  - Lack of research with users of social media platforms or engagement with platform providers
Survey of NSMNSS members

N:67
How do you make decisions about research ethics?

- 68% follow your own values and instincts about what is good ethical practice.
- 59% follow guidelines established by your field, discipline, or related publications.
- 56% follow guidelines established by your own institution.
- 39% follow guidelines included in published research methods books or articles.
- 33% follow instructions or guidance from your faculty or research supervisors.
Do you feel the guidelines you use are up-to-date and adequate for online researchers?

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<th>Option</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>YES</td>
<td>33%</td>
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<tr>
<td>NO</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<tr>
<td>NOT SURE</td>
<td>37%</td>
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Issues?

- Privacy & anonymity of participants
- Informed consent
- User-generated content (text & images) as data
- Sampling & recruitment
- Researcher identity, rapport & relationships
- Date ownership & data security
Twitter chats

What is public & private?
What is your responsibility as a researcher?
Do ethics differ between ‘public’ platforms/spaces & ‘walled gardens’?
What does online informed consent look like?
Is it wrong if I lurk and observe?
Resolving ethical dilemmas requires a "holistic" approach engaging views of many disciplines.

Research ethics = one tile in a mosaic of technological, political, cultural, and individual complexity.

Cultural competencies & flexibility needed when dealing with multicultural participants.

Social media are plural; no single method – ethics decisions must be context and method specific.

Need for cross-institutional ‘standardization’ of IRB boards?

Encouragement for researchers to publish methods/ethical case studies, failures & successes.

Encouragement for researchers to publish methods/ethical case studies, failures & successes.
What are the main gaps, areas needing clarification?

“I think they would all benefit from attention and clarity.”
What research ethics resources would be most useful?

- A web site, blog or wiki where I can find updated e-research ethics m... (72%)
- A set of clear guidelines I (or my institution) can adopt (69%)
- Opportunities for e-research ethics training for student or independent (48%)
- Opportunities for e-research ethics training for ethics board or Inst... (39%)
- Opportunities for e-research ethics training for research supervisors... (38%)
- Opportunities for training and learning/knowledge exchange for users ... (36%)
- Sample syllabi or course activities I can use to teach my students ab... (33%)
- Opportunities for e-research ethics training for research supervisors... (28%)
- Opportunities for training and learning/knowledge exchange for those ... (25%)
Preliminary observations

- Multi-disciplinary, multi-method approaches to research ethics are needed, while respecting the influence of disciplinary codes and work of associations.

- Ongoing development is needed as approaches will evolve with changes in technology and usage – static codes won’t work.

- Need to engage those who teach, review & edit: the “gatekeepers.”

- Need to encourage scholars to explain & discuss their methods, so we can learn from each other about the “how” and “why” of research with online and social media methods.
Resources suggested by network members

**Government**
Doing the right thing (DWP guidelines)

**Books & articles**

**Market research**
- ESOMAR
- CASRO

**Professional Associations**
- AOIR
- BERA
- MRS/MRA
Most mentioned issues & resources

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<td>What are public versus private spaces online?</td>
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<td>Protecting anonymity when using online quotations in research reports</td>
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<td>Because all digital information at some point involves individual persons, consideration of principles related to research on human subjects may be necessary even if it is not immediately apparent how and where persons are involved in the research data. (p. 4)</td>
<td>Social networking and other on-line activities, including their video-based environments, present challenges for consideration of consent issues and the participants must be clearly informed that their participation and interactions are being monitored and analysed for research.</td>
<td>If consent has not been obtained researchers must ensure that they report only depersonalised data from social media sources. If researchers are using automated data collection services, they are recommended to use filters and controls to remove personal identifiers such as user names, photos, links to the user’s profile, etc.</td>
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## What are public versus private spaces online?

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<td>What are public versus private spaces online?</td>
<td>Individual and cultural definitions and expectations of privacy are ambiguous, contested, and changing. People may operate in public spaces but maintain strong perceptions or expectations of privacy. Or, acknowledge that the communication is public, but that the specific context in which it appears implies restrictions. (p. 6-7)</td>
<td>Not addressed.</td>
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| **Public social media:**
  This covers the majority of social media. It includes all places where entry is without any form of barrier. |
| **Private social media:**
  This covers areas where the user or the website do not want the data to be publically accessible. All require username identification for access |
# Protecting anonymity in reporting

| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| - How are findings presented?  
- What immediate or future risk might occur by using exact-quoted material in published reports?  
- Are individuals adequately protected in pre-publication reports, such as workshops, conferences, or informal meetings?  
- Is the data easily searchable and retrievable? | In qualitative research one way to protect participants is through narrative and creative means, which might require the fictionalising of aspects of the research or the creation of composite accounts, such as in vignettes, providing generalized features based on a number of specific accounts. | Where [consent] is not possible their analysis must only be with depersonalised data. If researchers wish to quote publicly made comments they must first check if the user’s identity can be easily discoverable using online search services. If it can, they must make reasonable efforts to either seek permission from the user to quote them or mask the comment. |
Ethics – interim thoughts

- Are the ethics of social media research that different really?
- Do we need separate guidelines?
- Paper written up, including comparisons of the codes by the end of the summer
- Working with SRA ethics group around guidance
- More research with users of social media to better understand what people want/expect or need in regard to ethics
Thank you

If you want further information or would like to contact the network:

nsmnss@natcen.ac.uk

Tweet us @nsmnss