

SOCIAL MEDIA, PRIVACY AND RESEARCH ETHICS

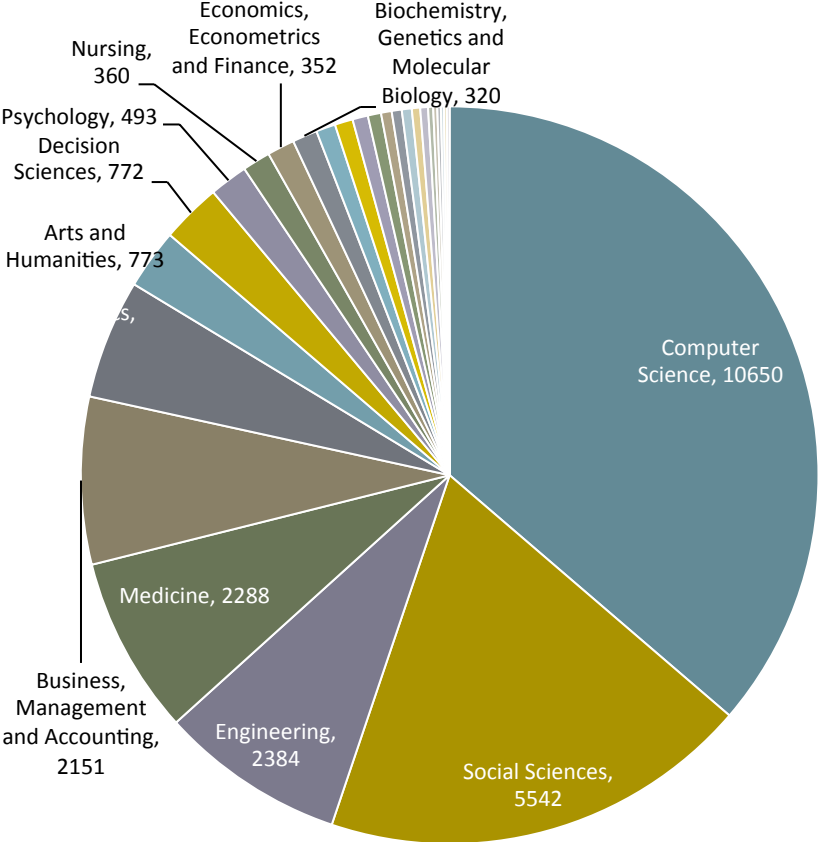
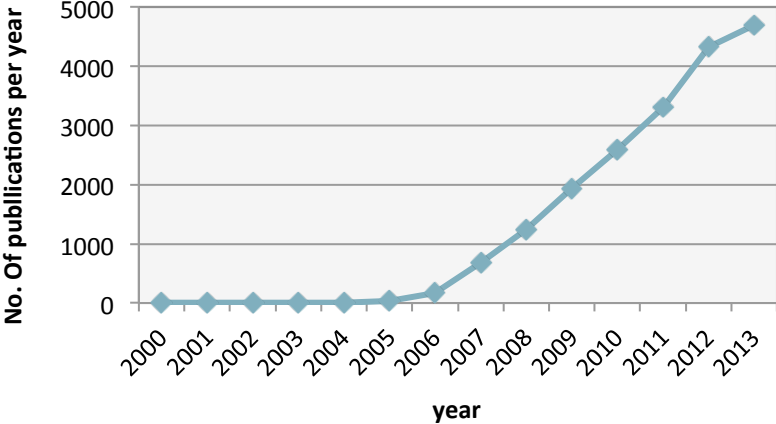
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Motivation and background: social media research 2000-2013

No. of publications (Scopus)



RESEARCH ETHICS

What is it about?

- Research(er) should do no harm





Experimental evidence of massive-scale emotional contagion through social networks

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Emotional states can be transferred to others via emotional contagion, leading people to experience the same emotions without their awareness. Emotional contagion is well established in laboratory experiments, with people transferring positive and negative emotions to others. Data from a large real-world social network, collected over a 20-y period suggests that longer-lasting moods (e.g., depression, happiness) can be transferred through networks [Fowler JH, Christakis NA (2008) *BMJ* 337:a2338], although the results are controversial. In an experiment with people who use Facebook, we test whether emotional contagion occurs outside of in-person interaction between individuals by reducing the amount of emotional content in the News Feed. When positive expressions were reduced, people produced fewer positive posts and more negative posts; when negative expressions were reduced, the opposite pattern occurred. These results indicate that emotions expressed by others on Facebook influence our own emotions, constituting experimental evidence for massive-scale

demonstrated that (i) emotional contagion occurs via text-based computer-mediated communication (7); (ii) contagion of psychological and physiological qualities has been suggested based on correlational data for social networks generally (7, 8); and (iii) people's emotional expressions on Facebook predict friends' emotional expressions, even days later (7) (although some shared experiences may in fact last several days). To date, however, there is no experimental evidence that emotions or moods are contagious in the absence of direct interaction between experiencer and target.

On Facebook, people frequently express emotions, which are later seen by their friends via Facebook's "News Feed" product (8). Because people's friends frequently produce much more content than one person can view, the News Feed filters posts, stories, and activities undertaken by friends. News Feed is the primary manner by which people see content that friends share. Which content is shown or omitted in the News Feed is determined via a ranking algorithm that Facebook continually

“But the data is already public”: on the ethics of research in Facebook

Michael Zimmer

Published online: 4 June 2010

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Abstract In 2008, a group of researchers publicly released profile data collected from the Facebook accounts of an entire cohort of college students from a US university. While good-faith attempts were made to hide the identity of the institution and protect the privacy of the data subjects, the source of the data was quickly identified, placing the privacy of the students at risk. Using this incident as a case study, this paper articulates a set of ethical concerns that must be addressed before embarking

The dataset comprises machine-readable files of virtually all the information posted on approximately 1,700 [Facebook] profiles by an entire cohort of students at an anonymous, northeastern American university. Profiles were sampled at 1-year intervals, beginning in 2006. This first wave covers first-year profiles, and three additional waves of data will be added over time, one for each year of the cohort's college career.

Research Ethics in General

- A question of responsibility :
 - Should I do this research?
 - What may be the consequences for others / society?
- Often leads to: Conflict between research interest and general norms and values
- Examples: human/animal experiments, cloning, military research, data protection

Example: Milgram Experiments

- 1961: Stanley Milgram starts conducting psychological experiments on authority and conscience
- Several variations

Protecting research subjects

- The research must not cause harm or disadvantages to anyone (physical or psychological)
- Example: Milgram Experiments 1961: „procedures which involve loss of dignity, self-esteem and trust in rational authority are probably most harmful in the long run” (Baumrind 1964)
- Concerns:
 - Conducting the research itself
 - Consequences of de-anonymization
 - Consequences of publications

See: Baumrind, Diana (1964). Some thoughts on ethics of research: After reading Milgram's "Behavioral Study of Obedience." In: American Psychologist 19(6): 421-423.

History of research ethics

- Medical experiments during Nazi-regime
- Nuremberg Code 1946/47, Declaration of Helsinki 1964
- USA: Institutional Review Board (IRB) 1974 (“review the ethical issues in all proposed research that is federally funded, involves human subjects, or has any potential for harm to subjects”)

Informed Consent (1)

- Participation in studies must be voluntary
- Participation must be „informed“, i.e. information about the goals and methods of the research must be supplied (who, what, how)
- Participants have a right to control over their personal information, i.e. must be able to withdraw consent (or: „debriefing“ after the fact)
- Personal data can only be recorded and processed with participants' consent

Informed Consent (2)

- Problems for quantitative studies: non-representative samples, results are influenced by the information provided
- Problems for qualitative studies: undercover ethnography, balancing sympathy and researcher objectivity
- In general: individual assessment is required of how to balance research interest and participant information

Information for Participants in the 'Hidden Data' Project

Aims of the project

The project "The Hidden Data in Social Media Research" investigates social media researchers' methods and practices (from data collection to presentation of results) across disciplines. We believe much expert knowledge about social media research methods as well as valuable research data are currently "hidden". Both data and expertise of methods are not easily accessible using traditional tools such as e.g. a literature review. By asking experienced researchers we hope to find out more about current practices for handling social media data as well as common challenges and pitfalls. We are conducting our project because, being social media researchers ourselves, we long for more professionalization and standardization in methodology, in dealing with social media data and in exchanging and comparing results. In addition, we work for GESIS (a non-profit research infrastructure institute in Germany) in its "Data Archive for the Social Sciences", and want to learn more about researchers' needs in working with specific data formats - as GESIS is planning to set up services for social media researchers in the future. If you have questions about the project and our objectives, please feel free to ask!

Participation in the project

Participation is on a strictly voluntary basis and you can stop participating at any time.

What data are we collecting?

We are conducting an interview with every participant, which we will record and which will later be transcribed by student research assistants at GESIS. After the interviews we will provide a questionnaire which we ask you to fill in and return. We may also be taking notes during the interviews, which you are welcome to look at.

What happens with the collected data?

All data will be shared and discussed between the two researchers Katrin and Katharina. Interview data will also be shared with students transcribing the interviews. For publication, we will use pseudonyms to avoid that participants may be re-identified by the readers, unless you allow us to use your real name (see below). If we have any doubts about re-identification we will contact the respective participant to discuss how best to proceed. We intend to archive the data in the GESIS data archive and to make it accessible to other researchers in the future using the GESIS data service, which respects any participating individual's right to the protection of their personal data (e.g. only researchers signing a contract will have access and data will not contain real names).

Please indicate if you would like us to:

- use your real name in publications

Social Media: Little standardization

- “lack of standardized practices” (Rooke 2013)
- “little specific guidance in the literature” (Henderson et al. 2013)
- 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)

Who should decide?

- Researchers themselves?
- “[we] 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)

AoIR guidelines

- “Recommendations from the AOIR ethics working committee”
- because the objects of study in internet research, namely the internet and its various technologies and user groups, are both complex and ephemeral, rules and guidelines also necessarily cannot be static
- acknowledges the “complexity of ethical decision making in individual cases” (Markham and Buchanan 2012: 3)
- Therefore: “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.”
- <http://aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf>

THE 'HIDDEN DATA' PROJECT

Researching ethics in practice

Aims of the Hidden Data Project

- Gain better understanding of empirical, methodological, theoretical challenges in social media research as perceived by the researchers themselves
- Uncover and observe 'hidden' everyday practices and approaches in detail
- Here: Ethics in particular: What are the practices?

Method

- Interviews with social media researchers at conferences
- ...an environment conducive to reflection
- Open questions to allow participants to introduce own topics

Data

- 40 qualitative semi-structured 25-40 min interviews at several major international internet studies conferences with very different audiences / participants
- Social media researchers from various backgrounds
 - identified from the conference program
 - working with social media data

Interview partners

- Professional level: 2 Masters students, 15 PhD students, 10 postdocs / lecturers, 12 professors
- Roughly two groups: Social scientists (many with media studies background) and computer scientists / others
- Europe (20), US (13), Australia (5), Asia (1), South America (1)
- Interviewees had experiences in research based on social media data gathered from various platforms: Twitter, Facebook, blogs, Foursquare, Tumblr, 4chan, reddit...

RESULTS

Weller, K., Kinder-Kurlanda, K. (2014): "I love thinking about ethics!" Perspectives on ethics in social media research. In: Internet Research Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR) IR15: Boundaries and Intersections, 23.-25.10.2014, Daegu, Korea.

Ethics in social media research

- Researchers agreed that the ethics of social media research are hugely important and an area requiring more work and reflection
- Various levels of confidence: from uncertainty to comprehensive, critical reflection

„I'm still very early on in thinking about all these questions“

„I love thinking about ethics!“

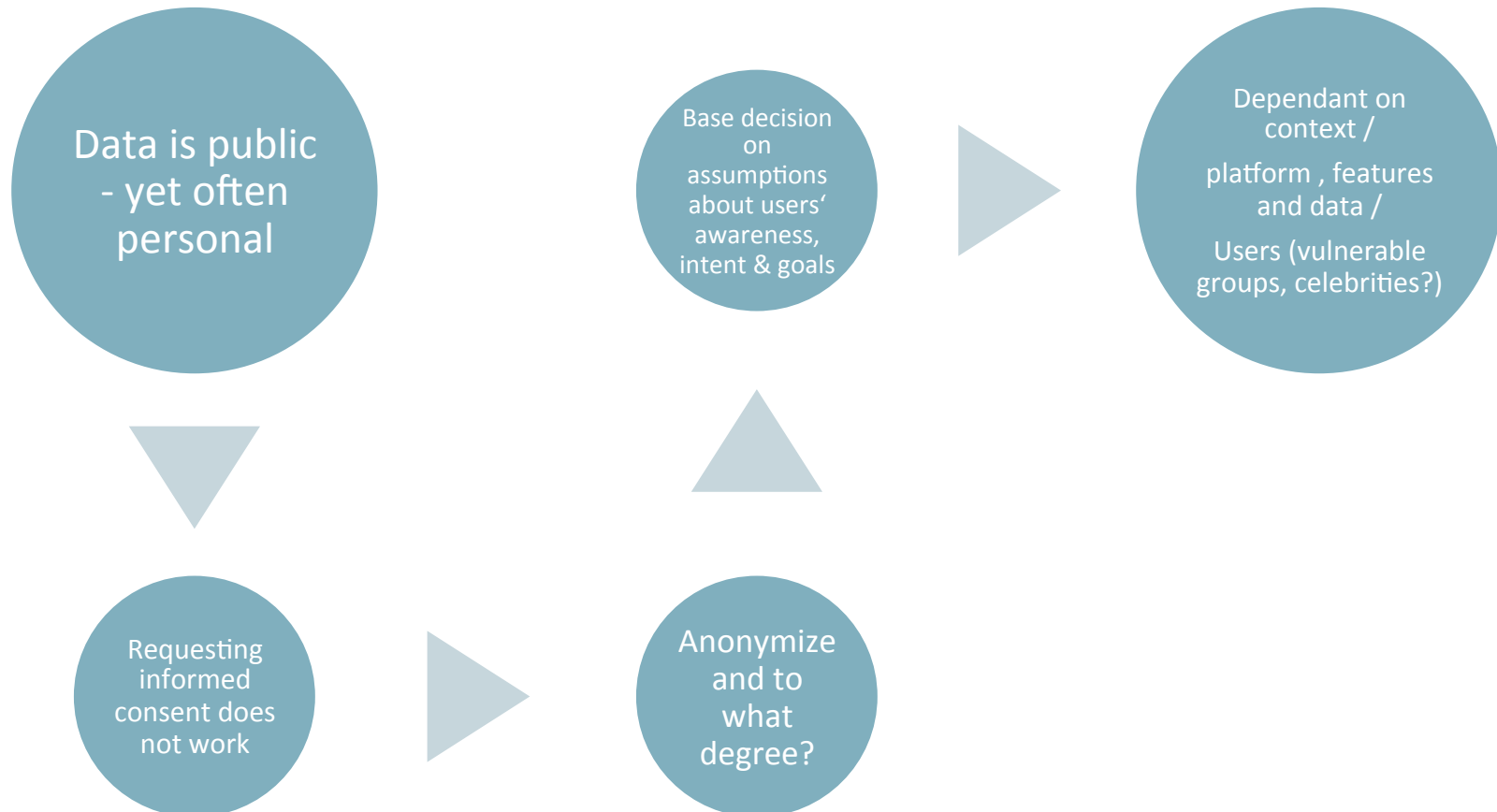
Individual approaches to ethical dilemmata

- Social media ethics in everyday research practice usually means solving ethical dilemmas that occur in various phases of the research
- Many different approaches to solving the question of whether the research may be harmful to anyone in various contexts
- The context is especially important in social media research:
 - > Lack of informed consent / Specific anonymization strategies

The lack of ,informed consent‘

- Asking for participants‘ consent is no longer feasible when working with big datasets
- Even if consent can be obtained formally (e.g. through Facebook apps) users may not be aware of what they are consenting to

Public data, lack of informed consent, users' intentions & anonymization



Assessment of users' intentions



- Intentional authorship
- Not aware how public it is
- Knows it's public but still does not want to be part of research
- May accidentally have made content public
- Belongs to a vulnerable group
- Unaware that it's public



Practice: Anonymization & ethical framings

„given the specific details of our particular situation, how do we know which principle, value, norm, rule etc. is in fact relevant to our decision?“

(Ess, 2014)

- No anonymization
 - recognize authorship
 - raise awareness of the publicness and not reproduce the illusion of ephemeralism
- Anonymize quotes (but not some, e.g. celebrities / corporations)
 - respect individuals' privacy
 - protect vulnerable groups
- No quotes at all
 - respect individuals' privacy
 - respect lack of consent

Legal issues – the platform provider's role

- Providers must have users' consent - what does it look like?
Does it include research?
- May hold copyright of the data – What are the terms of use?
Can data be used for research, can it be shared?
- And: Does the legal frame actually conform with the researcher's ethical requirements?

Team Work

- 1) What kind of data can be collected for research purposes from your chosen platform? What datasets could you potentially generate?
- 2) Think about what ethical aspects may play a role for each identified dataset.

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