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Doing ethics in online research

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The Internet and Ethical Instability

- To what extent are ethical principles established in the study of offline environments relevant to the study of online sites?
- What is the role/responsibility of researchers in these new environments?
- What is the status of data sourced from these settings?
- Legal/institutional responses playing catch-up.

The “Internet” is not one thing

- Recognition of the diverse nature of online environments
- Variance between environments in respect of:
 - public/privateness
 - modes of communication
 - visibility of participation
 - durability of content
 - sensitivity of topic/content
 - expectations of use/audience
- Complexity of individual environments



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facebook



You WILL reveal your past! Facebook's timeline feature becomes mandatory for all users - with just 7 days to 'clean up'

By ROB WAUGH

Last updated at 9:50 AM on 26th January 2012

Comments (698) | Share +7 | 7 | Tweet 245 | Like 3k

Facebook's Timeline - a new look for people's Profile pages which exposes their entire history on the site - will become mandatory for all users.

The 'new look' has been voluntary up until now. From now, users will simply be notified that they are being 'updated' via an announcement at the top of their home page, which users click on to activate Timeline.

As with voluntary switches to Timeline, those who are 'updated' will have just seven days to select which photos, posts and life events they want to advertise to the world.

Via the official Facebook blog, the site announced, 'Last year we introduced timeline, a new kind of profile that lets you highlight the photos, posts and life events that help you tell your story.'

'Over the next few weeks, everyone will get timeline. When you get timeline, you'll have 7 days to preview what's there now.

'This gives you a chance to add or hide whatever you want before anyone else sees it.'

Timeline has been criticised for showing off pictures and posts that people might have wanted to forget.

The new look also pairs with 'timeline apps', such as Spotify, which post every time people listen to a song, or eat a recipe or visit somewhere.

'You can learn more about these new features by taking the quick tour available at the top of your timeline,' says Facebook.

'If you want to get timeline now, go to the Introducing Timeline page and click 'Get Timeline.' Or you can wait until you see an announcement at the top of your home page.'



Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg unveiled the new-look Timeline profile last year: From now, users will simply be notified that they are being 'updated' via an announcement at the top of their home page

Your Cover

Fill this wide, open space with a unique image that represents you best. It's the first thing people see when they visit your timeline.



“Internet research” is not one thing

“Internet research encompasses inquiry that:

- (a) utilizes the internet to collect data or information, e.g., through online interviews, surveys, archiving, or automated means of data scraping;
- (b) studies how people use and access the internet, e.g., through collecting and observing activities or participating on social network sites, listservs, web sites, blogs, games, virtual worlds, or other online environments or contexts;
- (c) utilizes or engages in data processing, analysis, or storage of datasets, databanks, and/or repositories available via the Internet.
- (d) studies software, code, and internet technologies
- (e) examines the design or structures of systems, interfaces, pages, and elements
- (f) employs visual and textual analysis, semiotic analysis, content analysis, or other methods of analysis to study the web and/or internet-facilitated images, writings, and media forms.
- (g) studies large scale production, use, and regulation of the internet by governments, industries, corporations, and military forces.”

(FINAL DRAFT: Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research: Recommendations from the AOIR Ethics Committee (2012) <http://aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf>, p. 3-4)

“Doing...” ethics (online and off)

- .. research ethics is **achieved**, not **applied**
- Challenges:
 - establishing *and maintaining* an ethical stance
 - persuading others of our ethicality
 - Complying with the law (what do we know of this?)
- Value of examining the achievement of ethical positions by others..
- Recognising the diversity of (sometimes competing) resources that might inform our research practice.

Ethics of the Academy

- Ethics of our academic peer community :
 - Research ethics frameworks of professional bodies
 - Guidance in books, journal articles..
 - Case studies
 - Discussion with colleagues..
- Identifying with scholars in the field provides a way of legitimating our own actions
- But disagreement is common..

Ethics of the Academy

- Sources of ethical guidance
 - **Texts on the ethics of Internet research:**
 - Buchanan (ed.), 2003; Porter and McKee, 2009; Whiteman, 2012; Heider and Massanaai, 2012.
 - **Texts on Internet research methods:**
 - Jones (ed.), 1999, Mann and Stewart, 2000; Johns et al (eds.), 2004; Hine (ed.), 2005
 - **Guidance on specific methods/environments:**
 - e.g. the ethics of social networking research: Social Media Research Group (2016) Wilkinson and Thelwall, 2010; Bruckman et al, 2010; Zimmer, 2010, 2012.
 - **Specialist Frameworks and Codes of Practice:**
 - *Association of Internet Researchers* “Ethical Decision-making and Internet research” (Ess, 2002) <http://aoir.org/reports/ethics.pdf>
 - Townsend and Wallace (2016) *Social Media Research: A Guide to Ethics* <http://www.dotrural.ac.uk/socialmediaresearchethics.pdf>
 - **Specialist journals:**
 - *International Journal of Internet Research Ethics* (ijire.net)

Ethics of the Academy

- Attention to moves from **general ethical principles** to **localised ethical decision-making**
- Context specificity
- Need for **flexibility**; recognition of **instability** of ethics and need for prolonged review over the duration of the project
- *To what extent do these ideas grip in quantitative approaches to online research ethics?*
- Need to question the sedimentation of ethical guidance.



Ethics of the Institution

- Institutional, bureaucratic influence and oversight of research
- Institutional ethical discourses:
 - University codes of ethics;
 - Edicts;
 - Engagements with ethics committees and IRBs
 - Ethics committee advice

Challenges to Institutional Responses to Internet research

- Critiques:
 - IRB decision-making in US context
 - way online research is “othered” by institutions (Orton-Johnson, 2010)
- What generalised preconceptions are brought to bear in the assessment of Internet-based research?
 - ‘internet research’
 - ‘online/offline’ research
- How do generalised expectations inform decisions and recommendations?
- Are recommendations pertinent, relevant, possible?
- What energies are required in submitting ethics applications in relation to online research?

Ethics of the Researched

- Shift of attention towards the empirical field
- Ethics of the researched settings/individuals/objects
 - negotiation of ethics in day-to day activity
 - agreements on rights/values – as expressed in rules of use, statements on rights and responsibilities
- Empirical characteristics may inform ethical stance
 - For example understandings of privacy as expressed in online utterances
- but may be conflicting and may not resolve ethical issues..

Twitter as Public Domain?

- “Twitter is a public site. As such users’ posts are accessible by anyone on the internet” (Vieweg, 2010, np)
- A number of factors about the nature of this particular environment reinforce the site’s public status, reminding users of the public domain status of their messages (ibid)
 - Ease of accessing
 - Explicit statements about the public status of the environment
 - “protect” accounts, to close off the readership and control the public visibility of tweets
 - (“followers”, terms of service, privacy settings) and user behaviours suggest “a mindful aspiration for publicity” (ibid)

But..

- “Although Twitter users are presumably fully aware that the information they post is widely accessible by anyone online, it is not clear that they intend for this information to be mined and collected by researchers.” (Vieweg, 2010, np)
- “the fact that Twitter is public does not necessarily lead to a seamless ethical situation regarding data capture and analysis” (ibid)

Ethics of the Researcher

- Draws attention to the embodied, felt dimension of ethical positioning
 - personal and professional commitments and identifications
 - political affiliations.
 - The ethics of *this* researcher

Ethics of the Researcher

- “My partially insider status was instrumental in providing an approach to the issue. I considered how I, as a Wikivorce member, might feel about someone using my own 2007 postings as part of their research. My conclusion was that it was reasonable to expect the site owner, as a trusted and involved participant, to give consent to the research as a whole on behalf of the community, but that I would want [...]” (Paechter, 2013)

Ethics of Researcher/Researched: What is our status in relation to the researched?

- What is our role? To protect and/or to educate?
 - Who else is observing these settings?
 - Marketing, journalists, law enforcement, bots etc..
 - Should researchers support misguided expectations of the privacy/publicness of online environments?



Four Domains of ethics

Academy	<i>Ethics of our peer community : Research ethics frameworks, guidance in journal articles, discussion with colleagues</i>
Institution	<i>Institutional ethical discourses: e.g. University codes of ethics; announcements of university edicts; ethics committee advice</i>
Researched	<i>Ethics of the researched settings/individuals/objects. (From the negotiation of ethics in day-to day activity to agreements on rights/values – as expressed in rules of use for example)</i>
Researcher	<i>Our own “ethical baggage” - . personal commitments, political affiliations.</i>

(Adapted from Whiteman, 2010, 2012)

(Ethical discourses may be tacit/explicit, and strongly or weakly codified.

Ethical destabilisation may arise from any domain

In being “ethical” there is danger in anchoring your ethics too strongly in relation to one domain..

My study

- **Design**
 - 2.5 year observation of two online fan communities
 - Textual analysis of bulletin board interactions
- **Key Decisions:**
 - Name the sites
 - Name avatar usernames
 - Include verbatim text from forums in reporting of the work.
 - Not to seek informed consent from members of the sites
 - Archive forums discussions for analysis
 - Disseminate the work back to the community at the end of the study

Defending unannounced observation

- **Research questions**
 - Interested in patterning of textual interactions, rather than the “users” of the sites.
- **Nature of the environments:**
 - Pseudonymous environments
 - Reference to heritage of covert observation in offline public spaces, and use of secondary published material in research
 - Definition of the sites as public (as defined by reference to both technical and perceived markers of privacy)
 - Exclusion of newly privatised areas of the sites from analysis during the study
- **Exclusion of personal information about “real” participants in reporting of research**



4 “Domains” of ethics

Researcher	<i>Some allegiance to fan participants stemming from my own previous involvement in fandom.</i>
Researched	<i>Attention to different markers of publicness (tacit and explicit), norms and expectations about behaviour/use of content in my research settings. (eg Normalcy of lurking + (apparent) awareness of public nature of audience through analysis of posting activity (coming outs, “you guys”) and Rules of use..)</i>
Academy	<i>Aligning with fan and media scholars who had used observational methods, plus research using observational methods in public settings (especially within sociology). BSA ethical guidelines. Positioning in relation to growing Internet research ethics guidance.</i>
Institution	<i>Comments from APG upgrade examiner. Annual review process confirming adherence to ESRC guidelines (paper-based exercise).</i>

(Adapted from Whiteman, 2010, 2012)

(Ethical discourses may be tacit/explicit, and strongly or weakly codified.

Ethical destabilisation may arise from any domain

IN ORDER TO BE “ETHICAL” CANNOT POSITION YOURSELF ONLY IN ONE DOMAIN)

Key points

- Recognising the heterogeneity of the “Internet” and “Internet research”
- Attention to the dis/continuities between online and offline research
- Reflection upon moves from general principles to localised contexts/projects
- Recognition of the constructed rather than natural status of research ethics

“Undoing..” ethics

- Challenging positions that are presented as self-evident, such as those founded on natural or inherent values or virtues
- Avoiding the reification of ethical positions
- Trying to avoid identifying too strongly with particular points of authority
- Need for distance from the ethical resources that we draw from in negotiating ethical challenges



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Undoing Ethics

Rethinking Practice in Online Research

 Springer



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