SELFIES, SEXTING, AND NSFW CONTENT: DIFFICULT IMAGES IN DIGITAL RESEARCH

Backgrounder, ethical guidelines, digital visuals of bodies in social media research
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(Part 1 of 3 REB/Faculty talks, Feb 2018)
Who the heck am I?

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Center for production of empirically-informed open-access intersectionally diverse digital literacy resources for Canadian youth.
Case study 1: OK Cupid

OKCUPID STUDY REVEALS THE PERILS OF BIG-DATA SCIENCE

Emil OW Kirkegaard @KirkegaardEmil · May 8
The OKCupid paper has now been submitted. This means that the dataset is now public. Enjoy! :) openpsych.net/forum/showthre...

Ethan Jewett @esjewett · May 11
@KirkegaardEmil This data set is highly re-identifiable. Even includes usernames? Was any work at all done to anonymize it?

Emil OW Kirkegaard @KirkegaardEmil
@esjewett No. Data is already public.

Kate Crawford @katecrawford
Replying to @katecrawford
Repeat after me: 'just using public data' doesn't make it ethical. Just because you're researchers doesn't mean you're not doxxing.
6:59 AM · Mar 3, 2016
10 Retweets 302 Likes 376 Replies
Case Study 2: Text messaging and privacy

"The millions of us who text friends, family and acquaintances may each be viewed as having appropriated a corner of this electronic space for our own purposes. There, we seclude ourselves and convey our private messages, just as we might use a room in a home or an office to talk behind closed doors."

Supreme Court of Canada Rules Text Messages May Attract Reasonable Expectation of Privacy

December 8, 2017

Text messages can be considered private even once received, Supreme Court rules
Social media visual research ethics and methods

• **History of Internet Research Ethics**
  - AoIR Definitions of Internet Research/General Working Guidelines

• **Dominant Ethical Frameworks in Internet Research**
  - Feminist ethics of care
  - Virtue Ethics
  - Helen Nissenbaum’s Contextual Integrity

• **Basic ethics for Common visual methods**
  - Visual semiotic analyses of social media images
  - Online interviews
  - Online surveys
  - A note about online recruiting and recruitment posters

• **Ethics for more complicated Digital Visual Methods**
  - Two case studies: photos as prompts/photos are data
  - Difference between Internet research and Participatory visual methods

• **Novel Visual and Digital Methods**
  - Media Go-Along; Walk-through method; Meating in the story, intra-views, reading photos vertically
1. History of internet research ethics
2. AoIR Internet research ethics

AoIR has an ongoing commitment to ensuring that research on and about the Internet is conducted in an ethical and professional manner. The Ethics Working Committee, as composed of ethicists and researchers from various regions and countries, has produced two major reports to assist researchers in making ethical decisions in their research:

- 2012: Ethical decision-making and Internet research 2.0: Recommendations from the AoIR ethics working committee [PDF]
- 2012: This chart provides a useful starting point for internet researchers to consider ethics.
- 2002: Ethical decision-making and Internet research: Recommendations from the AoIR ethics working committee [PDF]

Researchers, students, ethicists, and related institutional bodies and academic organizations in the domain of Internet research may turn to these ethics document as a starting point for their inquiries and reflection. Just as these documents were immeasurably enriched by comments and contributions from AoIR members, we hope that readers will continue to call attention to issues and resources in Internet research ethics for debate and deliberation by the ethics working committee.

https://aoir.org/ethics/
AoIR 2.0 (2012): def Internet research

• **Utilizes the Internet to collect data** and information e.g. through online interviews, surveys, archiving, or automated means of data scraping
• **Studies how people use and access the Internet** e.g. Through collecting and observing activities or participating on social network sites, list serves, websites, blogs, games, virtual worlds, or other online environments or context
• Utilizes or **engages in data processing**, analysis, or storage of datasets, databanks, and or repositories available via the Internet
• **Studies software, code, Internet technologies**
• **Examines the design** or structure systems, interfaces, pages, and elements
• **Employs** visual and textual analysis, semiotic analysis, content analysis, or **methods of analysis to study the web** and or Internet facilitated images, writings, and media forms
• **Studies** large scale **production, use and regulation of the Internet** by governments corporations, and military forces
AoIR 2.0 (2012) General Guidelines

- We find the following principles to be fundamental to an ethical approach to Internet research

- **1. The greater the vulnerability of the community/participant, the greater obligation of the researcher to protect that community/participant**
AoIR 2.0 (2012) General Guidelines

2. Rather than one-size-fits-all pronouncements, ethical decision-making is best approached through the application of practical judgment attentive to the specific context.
3. 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.
4. When making ethical decisions researchers must balance the rights of subjects (participants) with the social benefits of research.
AoIR 2.0 (2012) General Guidelines

5. Ethical issues may arise and need to be addressed during all steps of the research process, from planning, research conduct, and dissemination.
AoIR 2.0 (2012) General Guidelines

6. Ethical decision-making should consult as many people and resources as possible in the process, including fellow researchers, people participating in or familiar with contacts and sites being studied, research review boards, ethics guidelines, published scholarship (within one’s discipline but also in other disciplines), and, where applicable, legal precedent.

In Canada this could mean for internet research:

2. AoIR Guidelines: [https://aoir.org/ethics/](https://aoir.org/ethics/)
5. Platform legalities around data ownership in user agreement
6. TALK TO OTHER INTERNET RESEARCHERS! WE ARE BIG NERDS AND LOVE TO SHARE AND HELP!
Core issue... data as **text** or **human**?
Core issue…data as text or human?

“The key issues around Internet research ethics […] [is] whether we should treat the online texts as data from human subjects with responding ethical concerns of consenting privacy, or should we treat the text as open for public consumption?”

Dominant Ethical Frames for Internet Research

• Most theoretical frameworks in internet studies are neither:
  1. Atomistic, nor
  2. Absolutist
Dominant Ethical Frames for Internet Research

• **Non-Atomistic:**
  Emphasizes relationality; reason/logic in balance with emotional care and friendship; community/family cohesion above individual; importance of webs of interdependent relationships; ethics “appear to be felt as much as they may be rationally sorted out in a kind of calculus” (p.234) Charles Ess, *Digital Media Ethics*.

• Four dominant ethical frameworks proposed by Charles Ess are:
  • Feminist ethics of care
  • Virtue ethics
  • Confucian ethics
  • Ubantu ethics
Dominant Ethical Frames for Internet Research

• Non-Absolutist:
  • Helen Nissenbaum argues that “finely calibrated system of social norms, or rules, govern the flow of personal information in distinct social contexts.”
  • These norms, define and sustain essential activities and key relationships and interests, protects people and groups against harm, and balances the distribution of power. (p.3) Helen Nissenbaum, Privacy in Context.
  • She maps out the various factors that must be considered to measure the “breach of a context norm” or a breach of “contextual integrity” when assessing breaches of privacy. Can also be used to assess one’s ethical trajectory in research:
    • 1. Contexts
    • 2. Roles
    • 3. Activities
    • 4. Norms
    • 5. Values
Helen Nissenbaum’s Contextual Integrity

People have different personae on different platforms.

If the researcher and participant have a PM string, there is a dual set of contexts.
But on the flip side…Big Data

- Major funding agencies LOVE Big Data

- When data set is released, what is the ethical relationship between the original researcher and the data? Options to have the person who initially collected the data to be involved in the decision about finally publishing the data even if he or she was not one of the authors of the resulting publication?

- Digital ethics education for anyone from computer sciences students to sociology students to….anyone doing what the AoIR defines as Internet Research?
The Substitute (holiday), Dawn Woolley, 2016
Doing Digital Visual Research

1. Basic ethics for Common visual methods
   • Visual semiotic analyses of social media images
   • Online interviews
   • Online surveys
   • A note about online recruiting and recruitment posters

2. Ethics for more complicated Digital Visual Methods
   • Two case studies: photos as prompts/photos are data
   • Difference between Internet research and Participatory visual methods

   • Media Go-Along; Walk-through method; Meating in the story, intra-views, reading photos vertically
1. Basic Online Ethics and Visual Methods

- **Visual semiotic analyses of social media images**
  - E.g.: analyzing how a celebrity (actor, musician, politician) presents themselves on Twitter, Instagram.
  - **Contextual integrity**: to assess the “public” nature of the image. A common undergrad or low level graduate project would be examining the presentation of selves on social media platforms; Is the person a **celebrity** or someone likely to have a public orientation/presence on their given social media platform? Can you tell if their role, activities, norms, and values aim to be more public?

- **Avoid lurking research**: Studying everyday people, especially young people on social media platforms without consent is frowned upon and considered “lurking”. This is best done as a form of digital ethnography which entails a whole slew of other methods and ethical considerations (how will you be present and mark your presence in the community? What will you contribute? How will you inform the community?)

- **Legal considerations for future dissemination**: Are you **publishing** your work at all? Is it in an open access journal? What creative commons licensing is being used and does it conform to the desires of the celebrity? (their brand is their profit)
1. Basic Online Ethics and Visual Methods

- **Online Surveys:**
  - **Data Storage:** Do you know how the technology of storage works? Where is the data housed? Does your consent form detail where the data will be housed and the legalities about its storage? How many “stops” does the data make and what legalities surround those “stops” (e.g. Lookback: American company, data stored in Ireland, but stored for one day in US servers). What are the costs of proprietary storage on your campus? Does your university already have an agreement with another company? Are you obliged to use them? Do you understand their data storage agreement and are you okay with it?
  - **Inclusivity:** Are your demographic questions inclusive? Many default demographic surveys default to gender binaries.
  - **Analysis:** What data analysis program will you use? Is it inbuilt with the survey software and where is the analysis data stored? (Fluid Surveys)

- **Skype/Google chat interviews:**
  - **Data Storage:** Where is the data for the video being housed? Does the person know that their image will be recorded? Do you need the image or is audio enough? Some online group chats have an in-built recorder but the video data is housed on their servers.
  - **Sufficient memory:** Quicktime has a screen capture option that permits you to capture the data on your screen and download to your computer. Does your computer have enough storage? Have you factored quality data storage costs into your research costs?
1. Basic Online Ethics and Visual Methods (con’t)

- **Online Recruiting: Mechanical Turk and others**
  - There are ethical issues with using Mechanical Turk to recruit;
  - **Benefits**: allow you to access audiences easily, cheaply, on average 1/3 the cost of a more formal research recruitment company.
  - **Pitfalls**: contributing to cheap labour (most survey respondents receive half minimum wage); survey fatigue as some people do this for full-time work. Upside there are quality companies out there.

- **Online recruitment posters and distribution:**
  - **Posters**: Where are your sharing your poster? How are you asking people to respond? Can you turn off the function to tag and redistribute your poster so potential participants don’t identify themselves? Can you monitor the poster so that its further distribution is controlled? Can you distribute through hubs and not people on social media?
  - **Distribution**: it’s best to know or be a part of a community before tossing out a recruitment poster. (e.g. I set up a Tumblr account for a half a year before sending out my posters. I also tagged my posters with common tags I observed used by my community #transgenderselfie #transselfie #transselfie Tuesday, #TST, #nonbinaryselfie, #nbselfielove, #nbselfie, nonbinaryselfie, #nbselfies, #transselfies; poster reblogged 47 times (track your reblogs) #ftmselfielove #just-exquisite, #fuckyeahcutetranschicks, #transfemininefashion, and #nonbinarypoc
2. More tricky visual methods: photo elicitation and participatory visual methods

**Photo elicitation:**
*Visuals as prompts*

**Participatory Digital Image Production:** *reading the cuts: Visual as data/activism*

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*Photo credit: SAKURAKO takes a selfie.*
*Site: https://www.flickr.com/photos/mujitra/*
*CC License: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/*

*Photo credit: Teamwork*
*Site: https://www.flickr.com/photos/pagedooley/*
*CC License: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/*
*Edited: faces removed*
2. Background and Key Aims of participatory visual methods

- Participatory visual and digital methods
  - Aline Gubrium, Krista Harper

- Four agreements that effect the ethics adopted in visual digital research
  1. **Dialogism**: the positioning of participation itself as a research ethics rooted in dialogue
  2. **Negotiating Multiple Audiences/Values**: the development of a research plan that reconciles scholarly goals at institutional ethics with collaborators goals and participatory action research ethical norms of collaboration and accountability
  3. **Public Display for Change**: The presentation of research findings to scholarly audiences and the public in a way that acknowledges and or addresses power and the ethics of representation
  4. **Shared ownership of data**: shared control and ownership of research which may include a visual materials and policy interventions as well as scholarly knowledge and plans for future collaboration
3. When privacy gets political...

- Corporate spaces of platforms (public = data for profit)
- Private spaces of individual online communities
- Internet studies

- Public space as controlled by hegemonic definitions of public norms
- Private as space of exclusion of marginal norms/practices
- Participatory visual methods

- Ethical space of research and dissemination: keeping the private as private as possible
- Ethical space of research and dissemination: making the private public
4. Ethics of Participatory visual methods: confidentiality

**Photo voice**
- Participants studied in interview room at Kwantlen
- All data stored in password protected file
- Kept in locked cabinet in my office
- Participants given pseudonyms
- Students asked to detail their own description but this data was limited because of the intersectionally diverse nature of my participants if I included all the demographic descriptions they provided they could be identified.

**Participatory methods**
- “what happens […] when participants are given pseudonyms and their names are deleted […]: what does this say about the participants ability to reclaim an authorial role in knowledge production?” (Gubrium and Harper, 2012, p. 50)
- On forced confidentiality: “How does this expectation continue to keep their voices hidden in or silenced indeed does it not contribute to a deficit base model depicting participants as oppressed individuals with needs rather than those possessing agency and cultural capital (Gubrium and Harper, 2012, p. 51)
- I chose not to use pseudonyms but only used first names in my publications
- You can use direct quotes and not link them to any particular participant but then this may frame the participants as a collective generalizable unit.
4. Ethics of Participatory visual methods: Consent

- **Photo Elicitation**
  - Consent should never be a one-time process in a participatory research project instead of must be woven throughout.
  - Inform participants of publications and presentations and the nature of the publications (open access/etc).
  - I never used the identifiable photos.

- **Participatory methods**
  - Consent should never be a one-time process in a participatory research project instead of must be woven throughout.
  - Offer consent until they get annoyed.
  - Offer many consent forms: consent to participate, consent after participants know full extent of the project (post-research), consent to release for educational, therapeutic, advocacy, purposes, in any locale: conferences, academic publications, online, etc.
4. Ethics of Participatory visual methods: Duty of care

**Photo Elicitation**
- Chose not to use the images when images could be described clearly (option: image modification software (Toon paint) and use image search to see traceability)
- Participants don’t have to share the images online. You can instruct “as if” they would share them
- Secure data storage and private location of data collection

**Participatory research**
- Flex your inner “momma-bear”
- Train participants in the legalities of image taking and ownership
- Train them in data storage and ethics
- Train them in how images move online
- Continue to train through the process and before following stages of consent are given.
- Pick and choose data needs to be made public
- Participants all have access to website produced online and can take anything down they want at anytime
- Track images bi-monthly using google image search
- Check in with participants monthly ongoing consent after project is complete
5. Novel Digital Visual Methods

- Encourage students to explore some of the emerging novel digital visual methods out there!
- **Media Go-Along** (Kristian Moeller)
  - Go along with participants in their everyday activities to see how the technologies and online spaces and spaces are enfolded into offline spaces, places and experiences.
- **Walk-through method** (Stephanie Duguay and Ben Light)
  - Do a reading of the platform affordances; inquire into the design of the platform or app to enquire into what is permits you to do and not do, who it’s designed for, etc
- **Scroll through Method** (Brady Robards)
  - Sitting beside participants while they scroll back and click through their social media and internet identities. Have them talk through the various elements of their online presence
- **Meating in the story, digital intra-views, Reading the cuts** (ME! Katie Warfield)
  - **Meating In the Story**: digital co-authoring/digital photo elicitation; shared google doc
  - Digital Intra-views: attending to pauses, non-human
  - Reading the cuts:
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