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Tracing Controversies in Hacker Networks: Ethical Considerations for Research on Communal Publics

This paper reflects on the ethical implications of research tracing controversies in digital, communal publics. It addresses two interrelated questions: How private or public are communication platforms used by digitally networked communities? And how should Internet researchers assess, define and treat online environments which are technically public, but suggest varying privacy expectations on the part of involved users? These questions are relevant to a wide range of Internet research. Privacy expectations have been discussed with regards to the ethics of using *Twitter*, *Facebook*, as well as other social media data (Zimmer and Proferes 2014; Ess 2013, 35ff.; Markham and Buchanan 2012, 6ff.; Zimmer 2010). In this paper, I focus on ethical implications of communal debates on controversial subjects.

Specifically, I examine how gender- and diversity-related tensions and incidents have been discussed in hacker communities. I argue that the content reflecting such controversies commonly travels across various platforms which imply different degrees of privacy expectations and therefore require distinct ethical considerations. I particularly highlight the relevance of three factors for ethical decision-making when analysing controversies: the privacy expectations suggested by traversed platforms and users' interactions; the vulnerability and public/private status of affected individuals; and the (moral) concerns which are at stake in respective debates.

Within hacker communities, issues related to gender and diversity have increasingly been subject of controversial discussions. This is on the one hand linked to the emergence of feminist hackerspaces and 'geek feminism' (Fox et al. 2015; Toupin 2014; "Geek Feminism" n.d.). On the other hand, these debates arose due to grave concerns about harassment and sexism in hacker cultures (Reagle 2017, 2012; Montgomery 2013; Mills 2012). In 2013, San Francisco hackerspace *Noisebrige* added an anti-harassment policy to its former one-and-only rule "Be excellent to each other".

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This adjustment of communal principles was implemented after members reported experiences of sexual harassment and assaults. In 2016, a longstanding, male member of the community was expelled, since he had been accused of sexual harassment and abuse of individuals involved in related hacker networks (Noisebridge 2016). Just like the incidents leading up to *Noisebridge's* anti-harassment policy, this decision was controversially discussed (see e.g. the comment section in Montgomery 2013; Isaacson 2016; Loll 2016; Fuchs and Weisbrod 2016).

Insights into such cases, online controversies and the dynamics leading up to their publication make highly relevant contributions to Internet research: They facilitate a better understanding of gender-related issues, discrimination, misogyny and sexism in networked developer publics. This information is needed in order to reflect on and counter factors compromising the mental as well as bodily integrity of (minority) individuals in these groups. Moreover, such research sheds light on issues of access and inclusivity – which is also relevant given the more general gender bias in IT professions (Abbate 2012; Misa 2011).

However, in many cases, the information needed in order to address controversies and debates pertinent to gender and diversity has ‘travelled’ across different platforms: before it reaches more overtly public platforms, such as blogs or online newspapers, some of the material relevant to analysing and observing sexism and discrimination in hacker communities is posted in *Google* groups, sent via mailing-lists, or posted on communal wikis. Methodologically, this indicates the relevance and implications of ‘data tracing’ approaches for Internet research (Hine 2015, 68ff.; Geiger and Ribes 2011) which I likewise reflect upon in this paper.

In a hackerspaces.org mailing-list discussion, titled “Women in Makerspaces”, one of the contributors stated:

“I highly encourage all members of our space no matter what their gender is to make it their own. [...] I would say the same should be true with the female/male issue. If a hackerspace has one female and she wants more females in the hackerspace then she should start a campaign to find more females. It could be that she host [sic!] a class about e-textiles or whatever it is females like to talk about.” (“Women in Makerspaces” 2013)

Subsequently, this suggestion has been widely used as illustration for misconceptions and stereotypes towards female hackers, brought forward by their male peers (Henry 2014; see also Davies 2017). Liz Henry, one of the co-founders of the women-centred hackerspace *Double Union*, wrote that many female hackers “[...] focused on the e-textiles message because we could make fun of it, not because it was especially horrible. That month there were many truly appalling, misogynist, sexist posts to the hackerspaces.org list” (2014). Her article, published in the online magazine *Model View Culture*, links to the abovementioned contribution/comment, hence making its anonymization impracticable – if one likewise aims at crediting Henry’s input/publication.

It is likely that the sender initially was not aware of the misconceptions implicated in his comment (and the ridicule it would receive). In fact, he later apologised, but also suggested that his message was taken out of context, without accounting for the dynamics of a mailing list discussion. In this sense, the contributions submitted to the mailing list do not only call for an ethical decision regarding *if* certain material may be referenced and included, but also *how* it is contextualised. With my analysis, I make two main contributions: Specifically, in tracing gender and diversity controversies in hacker cultures, this paper contributes to a better understanding of transitions between different online publics and their ethical implications. More generally, my paper provides insights into ethical decision-making in Internet research on controversial, normative subjects.

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