



Selected Papers of #AoIR2020:
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THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL RESEARCH ETHICS: THREE CASES

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Panel rationale and organization

Since its inception, the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) has fostered critical reflection on the ethical and social dimensions of the internet and internet-facilitated communication. These ethical foci are clearly evoked throughout the thematics of the AoIR 2020 conference call, beginning with Power, justice, and inequality in digitally mediated lives; Life, sex, and death vis-à-vis social media; and Political life online.

Concomitantly, Simon Rogerson, Chief Editor of the *Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society (JICES)*, describes *JICES* as aiming to "...promote thoughtful dialogue regarding the wider social and ethical issues related to the planning, development, implementation and use of new media and information and communication technologies." The Journal thereby offers "necessary interdisciplinary, culturally and geographically diverse works essential to understanding the impacts of the pervasive new media and information and communication technologies."

JICES and AoIR thus share central interests in the ethical and social dimensions of the internet and internet-facilitated communication, and are now collaborating to highlight AoIR conference presentations and papers via publication in *JICES*. As part of this collaboration, we collect here three papers that address these shared interests as specifically focused on research ethics. Presuming their acceptance and presentation at AoIR 2020, the papers will be revised especially in light of critical responses received there for inclusion in a special issue of *JICES* devoted to showcasing AoIR ethics work.

Our first paper, **Reflecting on the Ethics of Mobile Eye-tracking in a Mixed Methods Research Design** (Katja Kaufman et al), addresses the social and data ethical

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dimensions of the increasing use of Augmented Reality (AR) technologies in public spaces. In a classic application of the AoIR/Markham mantra, “ethics is method – methods are ethics” (Markham 2006), the paper describes an interdisciplinary mixed methods development project aimed at empirically researching the effects of mobile augmented reality on the perception of public space, using both georeferenced mobile eye-tracking and qualitative interviews. Insisting that method innovation is always also an inherently *ethical* endeavor, the paper takes up a range of affiliated ethical questions, such as balancing practical implementation and ecological validity against research ethical requirements in an interdisciplinary project setting, and critically assessing the ethical challenges that emerge from the use of innovative technical instruments. The paper further addresses the ethical measures that must be taken vis-a-vis the participants, student researchers, stakeholders of the public sites, and their well-being on one hand, and the data management of mixed methods data sets, data and results dissemination and the implications of our results for societal future on the other.

Paper 2, **The complex balancing act of researchers’ ethical and emotional capacities and responsibilities** (Ylva Hård af Segerstad), addresses these issues from the first-hand experience of a researcher-participant who, as a bereaved parent, was requested to research a closed community for bereaved parents on Facebook. Such communities have become increasingly prominent and important, and the paper explores the methodological, ethical and emotional challenges of undertaking such research, drawing in part on the AoIR IRE 3.0 guidelines. The author explores central issues of trust, critical self-reflection on one’s research methodologies vis-à-vis one’s own profoundly challenging experiences, the specific ethical and emotional demands of such participant-observation research, and the burdens and limits these impose upon the participant-researcher. Specifically, informed consent in these contexts is distinctively difficult and must be reconsidered.

Paper 3, **Digital Ethics and the Situationist Challenge to Virtue Ethics** (Bastiaan Vanacker), evaluates recent interest in applying virtue ethics to the ethical questions presented by digital media – e.g., the new issues evoked by Amazon’s Ring Doorbell: the good intentions of preventing package theft are countered by massive problems of privacy violations, copyright issues and concerns about surveillance and social justice. Virtue ethics is a promising approach to novel ethical challenges: the person with the right disposition and character traits should be able to appropriately respond to novel difficulties. But virtue ethics is criticized by situationist psychologists and philosophers who point out that, at least for most of us, our moral actions are influenced more by situational factors than by our character. Hence a virtue ethics model may not be the best approach to the situational uncertainties presented by digital technologies: the paper argues instead for a pragmatist, situation-based approach that takes into account how our norms and behaviors in digital spaces are shaped in reaction to ever changing events and circumstances.

These three papers thus build upon and helpfully expand AoIR’s signature focus on Internet Research Ethics through two empirically-oriented papers on research ethics/methods in two specific contexts, complimented by a more theoretical exploration of virtue ethics and pragmatism. They further address the central interests shared

between AoIR and *JICES* in the ethical and social dimensions of the internet and internet-facilitated communication.

Paper 1: REFLECTING ON THE ETHICS OF MOBILE EYE-TRACKING IN A MIXED METHODS RESEARCH DESIGN

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Technologies that produce augmented realities (AR) and, subsequently, augmented spaces, such as smart phones, smart watches and glasses, become increasingly important for the everyday life of many people (Boeckler, 2014). The societal and data ethical consequences of this development, particularly when it comes to the use in public space, are widely debated. However, social sciences until now lack appropriate methodologies to underpin these discussions with empirical data on the effects that AR actually has on people's perception of public space (Merriman, 2014; Ricketts Hein, Evans, & Jones, 2008). In an interdisciplinary mixed methods development project, we investigate how the effects of mobile augmented reality on the perception of public space can be researched by integrating the technological innovation of mobile eye-tracking. Mobile wearable eye-trackers such as *Tobii Pro Glasses 2* encompass video recording with a front-mounted camera, which provides a documentation of the user's general visual frame. Within this frame, the eye-tracking technology follows and records the visual fixation of attention by the person wearing the eye-tracker, allowing for an analysis of fixations, attention allocation and subsequent calculations of cognitive indexes. In addition, the device offers audio recording, an accelerometer and a gyroscope. For our study, we use two highly debated public Austrian parks as research settings. In the parks, participants are asked to walk a given tour repeatedly while wearing the eye-tracker, first when using no digital media, then when using digital media thematizing the respective park in an AR smart phone app. Simultaneously, GPS is recorded by a GPS unit.

Mixed method development as a research ethical endeavor

While method development projects often focus on feasibility and criteria such as validity and reliability, it is rarely acknowledged that method innovation is always also an inherently *ethical* endeavor (Markham, Tiidenberg & Herman, 2018; Nind et al., 2013). Thus, in this paper we want to bring to the fore the diverse ethical aspects of our interdisciplinary mixed method development project. We distinguish three dimensions of ethical concerns: research ethics (1) in the practical implementation of the study design, (2) with regard to data processing and management, and (3) with view to the societal implications of developing instruments to track and understand human behavior.

(1) Research ethics in the practical implementation of the study design

Research ethics need to be considered with regard to the technological capabilities of instruments involved and users foreseen. For example, mobile eye-trackers entail audiovisual recording, a feature that was highly criticized in the case of the AR device *Google Glasses* due to the invasion of privacy. How should a mobile eye-tracker then be used for research in public space? While it seems ethically appropriate to make passers-by aware of the recordings that happen, for example, by putting up signs, such announcements pose a risk to ecological validity restraining the advantage of the instrument's mobility and its accompanying potential for research in real-world settings. Similarly, the well-being of participants needs careful weighing. Our research seeks to analyze the effects of digital media on the perception of highly debated public places. Some existing online content contains violent scenes like brawls or police arrests; thus, the content could potentially be distressing to participants. Therefore, we prepare participants with informed consent where particularly sensitive individuals are advised against participating. However, the induced self-selection process entails a potential bias towards excluding those participants that may be particularly affected by digital media, thereby preventing findings that might be most relevant in the context of this research object. Further, in complex real-world problem-oriented research, single discipline's views are most often too limited to find appropriate answers, and thus interdisciplinary discussions need to take place (Decker, 2004), acknowledging that "everyone has something to contribute and to learn" (Balsamo & Mitcham, 2010, p. 270). Further, the question of which stakeholders (not) to engage is relevant when discussing the societal implications of AR based on our results. We need to closely evaluate who qualifies as a stakeholder in this specific context. Our view of intended stakeholders for public space might differ from those envisaged by political actors and city councils.

(2) Ethical aspects of data processing and management

To protect participants from harm, researchers are advised to collect only the data that is needed. Meanwhile, due to the explorative nature of method innovation, researchers might be prone to collecting as much data as possible. It is thus the researchers' responsibility to sort, select and analyze the data in an ethical way, which is always a qualitative and highly selective process (see Dewsbury, 2010). Further, the study collects different types of data, ranging from personally identifiable information (PII) collected in interviews to biosensing data produced by eye-trackers that is not personally identifiable. Here, participants need to be able to understand which data is collected, what happens with it, and who has access to it. Striving for an open data approach where data is made available to the research community and the public, it

becomes also necessary to put effort into adhering to data ethical standards, for example, in the form of metadata.

(3) Societal implications of developing instruments

While method development aims to forward scientific research methods, the resulting methods to track and understand human behavior in increasingly technologically sophisticated ways might subsequently be applied by parties outside academia, including scenarios where instruments are misused, for example, for state surveillance. An ethical approach to method development thus needs to consider societal implications not only of the results produced by innovative methods, but also of the methods and instruments being made effective by researchers.

It can be concluded that in the process of mixed methods development that integrates new technologies, research ethics remain a trade-off. It seems, therefore, all the more important for researchers to openly share their experiences and challenges in doing research ethics when engaging method development.

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Paper 2: ON THE COMPLEXITIES OF STUDYING SENSITIVE COMMUNITIES AS A RESEARCHER-PARTICIPANT

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Introduction

In the context of a closed community for bereaved parents on Facebook I explore the complexities of methodological, ethical and emotional challenges of conducting sensitive research. Being a bereaved parent myself, I do this from the perspectives of both the researcher and the participant - a researcher-participant, rolled into one, as it were.

Many aspects of contemporary every-day life is transformed with increasing digitalization. In societies where death is “the ultimate unmentionable” (Mander, 2007), social media and mobile technologies offer new possibilities for grieving parents to find support online. These online communities may offer their members “digital safe-havens” acting as resources for coping with their situation (Baym, 1995; Yeshua-Katz, 2016).

The grief support community that we have studied is a closed group on Facebook with some 2200 members. It is maintained and moderated by a physical grief support organization in Sweden. Results from our studies show that the community itself and the social support from peers are vital resources for many members. Furthermore, the closed nature of the group is a prerequisite for the group to function as a safe-haven in which the bereaved parents feel secure that they will not be “judged by those unbereaved” (Hård af Segerstad & Kasperowski, 2015).

As the goal of the present paper is to explore methodological, ethical and emotional challenges, an account of the empirical material or methods used for data collection and analysis is not included.

Challenges of simultaneously being a researcher-participant

To conduct responsible research from the perspectives of both the researcher and the research participants puts high demands on the researchers’ ethical as well as emotional capacities and responsibilities (Ellingson, 2017; Lammers et al 2019).

The ethical guidelines proposed by the Association of Internet Researchers stress that research ethics is not a list of checkboxes on a form to tick before undertaking a study, but a process which requires deliberation throughout study including design, data collection, analysis and dissemination (franzke et al., 2020). Markham argues that methods and ethics cannot be separated - ethics is inextricably intertwined with methods. Studying vulnerable individuals and closed communities online further highlights the necessity for research to be case and context sensitive as well as for the

researcher and the research design to be flexible and adaptive (Markham & Bride, 2006).

In similarity with Raun (2017) in his studies of mourning through photo-sharing on Facebook, my own experience of loss initiated the research focus of bereaved parents' use of social media. This functioned as a way to approach the vulnerable community with a research purpose, and constituted the prerequisite for building trust and enriching the dialogue with the community members. However, as a researcher-participant you must pay extra attention to if and how your own individual experience and assumptions might have an impact on how you frame your research, design questionnaires, conduct interviews, perform analyses and interpret and frame results, etc.

As an "insider", or a researcher-participant I was invited to conduct our studies and had gained the trust of both the organization, the administrators and community members. On the one hand, being an insider gave me access to the community, but on the other hand put very heavy demands on myself as an ethically responsible researcher on how to present the research to the members in order to honor their informed consent, but also on how to select, collect, store, manage and disseminate the data. These aspects are both connected to the sensitive topic and trust in the closed discussion group and to technological aspects such as the architecture and algorithms of Facebook, and what kind of data is possible to collect.

Being a researcher-participant rolled into one and studying and observing an online environment which offers the social support you might be in need of yourself can have unexpected consequences: your research can in effect bar you as a bereaved parent from using the community as a resource for coping with the grief.

Most of the time, sharing the experience with those you study can be a resource, but sometimes utterly overwhelming. The content shared by members in the closed community, the sheer amount of intense and desperate interaction is hard to regard objectively and at times impossible to handle. Both as a bereaved parent in the process of adapting to my own loss, and as a researcher, I have to take a break now and then from observing what is happening in the closed group. Like the experiences Svedmark (2016) reported from studying the online activities of vulnerable individuals, these affect me and stay with me. The interview situation has similar characteristics: *because* you are a researcher-participant, a precious connection between the interviewees and yourself as a researcher is often established which can have both emotional and methodological impact if ignored.

Reconsidering the notion of informed consent

In our studies we have encountered bereaved who - at least at one point in their grief - wish us to NOT anonymize quotes when disseminating results, but explicitly asked us to use their names and the name of their deceased child. Walter argues that, in some cases, anonymity may prove disrespectful to both the bereaved and the deceased (Walter, 2017). This forces us to reexamine the notions of anonymity and informed consent, and question if vulnerable research participants (or indeed, any research participant) fully grasps what informed consent entails in the short and long run in terms of academic dissemination.

Hopes and expectancies of the community under study might put the researcher into a dilemma, ethical aspects of informed consent might have to be reconsidered as well as emotional challenges of engaging in and with sensitive research - all of which makes for a complex balancing act.

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Paper 3: DIGITAL ETHICS AND THE SITUATIONIST CHALLENGE TO VIRTUE ETHICS

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This project starts from the notion that digital ethics should be about anticipating and preventing functional shift of new technologies. By this, I mean that the challenge of digital ethics is not only to evaluate whether the proposed uses of a new technology are morally defensible, but also to point out and prevent unintended but morally dubious uses of a new technology.

Ess (2012) has argued that digital ethics (DE) would develop along two tracks: A foundational trajectory that would explore fundamental changes to our ethical frameworks precipitated by digital technologies and, secondly, a more applied research trajectory that would deal with the expanding range of ethical problems presented to us by the proliferation of digital devices. This project is located at the intersection of these two tracks. It acknowledges the expanding range of ethical problems emerging as a result of the ubiquity of digital technology, but it also considers which ethical frameworks are most appropriate to deal with these problems (while sidestepping the question if new ethical frameworks are needed for our digital age).

Take for example Amazon's Ring Doorbell, which might have had the perfectly justifiable intention of preventing packages from being lifted from porches, but is now facing a storm of scrutiny and criticism because of privacy violations, copyright issues, and concerns about surveillance and social justice. While other forms of applied ethics (journalism ethics, legal ethics, medical ethics...) of course also deal with the un-anticipated, the features of digital technologies make this task particularly challenging.

In light of the challenges presented by digital technologies, this project wants to evaluate the recent interest in applying a virtue ethics framework to the ethical questions in digital communication ethics (Vallor, 2016; van der Sloot, 2014; Borden 2007; Plaisance; 2014, 2016) and interpret these efforts in light of the virtue ethics/situationism debate of recent decades.

At first sight, an ethic of virtue seems to be well-equipped to handle novel ethical challenges and their unpredictability. A person with the right disposition and character traits would be able to deal with novel ethical challenges she encounters. The virtue of temperance, for example, would prevent someone from losing his temper on social

media, just as this character trait would prevent him from losing his temper waiting in line at the airport. Or, virtue ethicists would suggest, if that person lacks the character trait to automatically act in accordance with the appropriate virtue, she could imagine what a moral exemplar would do in such a situation, and emulate this behavior.

However, over the last decades, virtue ethics have come under fire from situationist social psychologists and philosophers such as Doris (1998) and Harman (1999), who have pointed out that our moral actions are influenced more by situational factors than by our character, at least for the vast majority of us. They have demonstrated that most people's moral actions lack the cross-situational and cross-temporal consistency that virtue ethics would predict.

Instead, social psychology experiments have shown that small and morally insignificant changes in experimental setting account for most changes in moral behavior. So-called good Samaritan experiments, for example, illustrated that people were less likely to help a stranger when loud music was playing on the background or when the weather was bad, compared to situations where this was not the case (even though ethically, these changes should not matter). These objections might be even more salient in the context of online communications, where situational factors (lack of face-to-face interaction, for example) could have an even more outspoken effect on (im)moral behavior.

Situationists have also challenged the notion of moral exemplars on epistemological (how can I know what the exemplar would do?) ethical (what advantage does following an exemplar have over following deontological or utilitarian ethics?) and psychological (will knowing what a moral exemplar will do be enough to overcome my lower inclinations?) grounds. The relative novelty of many digital ethical dilemmas also might make it less likely that appealing to and emulating a moral exemplar would provide useful guidelines for moral actions. You may consider a person you admire as a moral exemplar, but how would you know how that person would react to smart doorbells?

Virtue ethicists have articulated some convincing rebuttals to this criticism by pointing out that situationists either misinterpret the studies they refer to, or operate on a flawed notion of what virtue ethics means (See Sabini & Silver, 2005). Nevertheless, the situationist criticism is generally considered to be damaging to certain articulations of virtue ethics. One of the important lessons of situationism is that when entering a situation where immoral actions might be tempting, reliance on one's character to resist temptations might be misguided for most of us. This warning seems particularly relevant in the context of networked communication, where it is often alluring to engage in vicious arguments, doxing, copyright infringement and other anti-social behaviors.

This article will investigate whether or not this situationist criticism is problematic for virtue ethics as an ethical perspective towards digital ethics. An alternative model in the form of a pragmatist, situation-based approach, that takes into account how our norms and behaviors in digital spaces are shaped in reaction to ever changing events and circumstances, rather than by immutable character traits, will be presented as a possible alternative for a virtue-based approach to digital communications.

This approach, as articulated by Kitcher (2014) presents a functional view on ethics, where ethical norms are developed over time and generations, as a project that has as its goal to make communal living possible. When dealing with new technologies presenting us with new questions with answers that are not obvious (“Do smart doorbells violate privacy rights of passers-by?”) an approach that is rooted in pragmatism and the has taken the lessons of situationism to heart could provide a useful tool not only in determining appropriate uses for new technologies, but also in anticipating its unintended future uses.

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