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RESEARCH ETHICS PRACTICES IN A CHANGING SOCIAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE

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This contribution considers the evolution of social media research and specifically focuses on changes in ethical practices and decision making. Our contribution is based on a long-term project in which we interview researchers who study social media platforms and users. Our project started in 2013/2014 with a series of more than 40 qualitative, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with researchers who were at different stages in their scientific career and who were targeting different social media platforms with a variety of disciplinary and methodological backgrounds. The interviews provided insights into the challenges of everyday research practices at the various stages of the research process, as well as into motivations for specific approaches and into critical reflections on research design and decision making, particularly concerning research ethics.

Since our first round of interviews the social media research landscape has changed considerably. AI and machine learning methods are (again) challenging notions of human and non-human agency and various incidents and phenomena around social media have caused changes but also wider discussions in academia and beyond. Examples are the so-called “Cambridge Analytica scandal” and Facebook suspending access to its data via the formerly used API. These events have affected social media research in general (e.g. as they limit options for accessing data) and have also initiated more critical reflection of methods, processes, and ethics.

At the end of 2019 we started re-interviewing the participants in our study. In addition to questions about the details of everyday data work and the rationales behind (ethical) decision making, we are asking participants what has changed in the way they conduct

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research with social media. A reading of the initial interview transcript (during a break in the interview) allows participants to compare their answers with the previous interview and to reflect on process and change.

Based on our interviews as well as the ongoing discussions of Internet Research Ethics in the community, this paper focuses on the ethical dimensions of social media research practices and how they have evolved over the past years.

When we started studying social media researchers' data practices in 2013 we witnessed a variety of practices resulting out of different ethical framings. For example, depending on whether researchers prioritized recognizing authorship over privacy concerns or the other way around, they would decide to quote tweets or other social media content in their research papers or not. Situations were often considered to be unproblematic from an ethical point of view if only public figures (e.g. organizations, politicians) and deliberately publicized content was studied. Overall, most ethical decision making was centered on issues around the 'publicness' of content, how to deal with data as a consequence of uncertainty about social media users' privacy expectations and consent to research, and, consequently, publication practices.

First results from our current round of interviews indicate that things look a little differently at the current point in time. First, a wider variety of people are much more concerned about the ethics of social media research in addition to individual researchers themselves. Particularly, there has been much public attention in the media toward the role of platforms in manipulating user experiences and on the role of researchers in providing methods and tools to these endeavours. Professional associations in various disciplines and regulatory bodies of all kinds of institutional levels have positioned themselves with regard to ethical conduct in social media research (see e.g. the recent German Data Forum (RatSWD) publication on "Data collection with new information technology" (RatSWD, 2020)), and to the significant role that platforms and their algorithmically shaped publics play within our societies (see e.g. the recently updated code of ethics of the Association of Computing and Machinery ACM (ACM, 2018)). Second, and concurrently to the wider concern and attention being paid to ethics in social media research, different ethical issues are being attended to. Based on our first results we argue that there are more established (formal and informal) norms and practices around sharing information in publications – but a far wider variety of (ethically reflective) practices around data access and data sharing. These practices follow calls for pragmatically 'routing around' the restrictions that are being put in place by platform owners to establish more just and equal footings between users, researchers and platforms (Halavais, 2019).

We are witnessing research in an environment that is more visible and being paid attention to much more than was the case only five years ago. At the same time we are seeing an even greater variety of potential data practices resulting out of opposing ethical frames being applied. There are at once more established practices (around treatment of user information in publications and privacy-conscious data handling) and at the same time more willingness not to follow rules (for ethical reasons), prioritizing ethical concerns over legal restrictions. It has become more recognized how practices many regard as undesirable have spread and the role of platforms in shaping public

spaces has been revealed – if not their still mostly opaque algorithms, practices and influence on individual users' behaviour. An API's terms of service may in the past not have been followed for reasons of practicality or not knowing any better – now it has become an ethical obligation for many researchers to more generally question power imbalances in data access and algorithmic influence and to rethink their (legal) relationship with a social media platform.

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