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MAKING ETHICAL DECISIONS: SEEING TWITTER BOTS AS (NON) 'HUMAN SUBJECTS' WHEN INCLUDING THEM AS RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

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Overview

This collaborative talk challenges the definitions of the situated site of human subjects protection in Internet research. The collaborators address a major tension to the deliberative process of ethical decision-making as proposed in the 2012 AoIR report: the role non-human language objects (computer code and bots) have as entities worth ethical consideration in the research process about consent and risk/harm. Using the @horse_ebooks hoax as a relatively similar manipulation to that of the Facebook emotional contagion story, the speakers will talk theorize the relationship between human, algorithm, and emotional persuasion, and present findings from two wholly algorithmic Twitter bots, @sargoth_ebooks and @randi_ebooks to challenge an ontological relationship with humans and algorithms. The speakers will close with specific ethical questions related to computer code and bots and ask for audience member participation to establish future guidelines in this area. Accessible print handouts / accessible information will be provided on a website during (and made available) after the talk.

Abstract

Ethical decision making is necessary for Internet research, especially for addressing the major tensions of data(text)/persons, which blurs the conditions of anonymity and effects of emotional contagion on human subjects. Drawing on media and actor network theories, this proposed talk (re)defines the ethics of data(text)/persons with consideration of non-human Twitter bots by asking what are the ethics involved in researching and working with non-human language objects, i.e., computer code operating without human intervention? To address this theoretical question, the speakers draw upon an imaginary of rhetorical agency and persuasion, recognizing that computer code, as a nonconscious actant, makes things happen in Internet cultures. As such, the speakers claim a responsible ethical consideration entails being open and

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responsive to the actions of Twitter bots, thus considering persuasion operating at the code-level. Ultimately, this talk features discussions of how to work with non-human subjects/objects in Internet research by expanding the scope and guidelines of the 2012 *AoIR Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research* report.

In the final copy of the AoIR ethics report, the authors outline guidelines for ethical Internet research for data collection, human use, data processing, software technologies, and design elements. In the key guiding principles, the authors position “vulnerability” and “harm” along a human-axis. Later in the document, the authors describe complications of data(text)/personhood, using bots as an example of research with non-human subjects. However, the proposers argue for aligning vulnerability and harm along a non-human axis as well, insofar as considering how elemental forces, distress, aging, software updates, and sustainability issues layer into an ethical guideline for research with Internet-connected, non-human subjects/objects.

The proposition of computer code as rhetorical agents capable of persuasion is provocative insofar as a claim divorces human activity, free will, and consciousness from the definition of agency. Rhetorician Marilyn Cooper (2011) elsewhere stated that agents are not necessarily aware or conscious of the changes they make in the world, and argued agency arises from an “emergent property of embodied individuals” (p. 421). However, we contend that agency also arises from computer code. For example, under Latour’s terms computer code is an actant; code compiles, analyzes, synthesizes, executes data to make change in machines and people. We draw upon media studies and scientific and technological scholars Wendy Chun (2011), Katherine Hayles (2005), and Rob Kitchen & Martin Dodge (2011), who theorize that computer code “performs” and “acts” once integrated into a program’s functions. In the first half of our talk, one collaborator will draw attention to an imaginary of rhetorical agency and persuasion of computer code to establish computer code as rhetorical agents capable of persuasion and change and align this theoretical discussion with guiding principles of a non-human ethical guidelines for Internet research.

The second collaborator will apply Lucas Introna’s (2009) argument for overcoming an anthropocentric ethics through an ethics of hospitality going “beyond the self-identical of human beings” to discuss how the persuasive of computer code and the imaginary of rhetorical agency *can* exist within Twitter bots. Through the analysis of several “ebook” accounts on Twitter, this part of the conversation will question the relationship between doing Internet studies research with Twitter bots as participants while considering the ethics involved in speaking with them as subjects. As Introna has considered the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode, “The Measure of a Man” (1989) (in which Captain Picard argued for Lieutenant Commander Data’s right of determination and agency as a sentient being), the way people treat technological artifacts as artificial beings emphasizes an anthropocentric ethics that fails to accept a true otherness. In light of his view, this part of the discussion will analyze how we build community with beings much unlike ourselves in “body,” but who speak and participate in Twitter all the same. The analysis of three Twitter accounts @horse_ebooks, @sargoth_ebooks, and @randi_ebooks provides grounds to consider an ethics for non-human participants in Internet research from a theoretical perspective of rhetorical agency and persuasion. As Mackenzie (2006) noted, computer code and software harnesses agency through

technicity, with the ability to augment and mediate transactions in situations. He reminds researchers that code operates through its situated activity, and the degree of autonomy code produces relies upon the complexity of the code itself.

In sum, this proposed talk considers the concept of 'human subject' under a vigorous perspective through the context of real-time Twitter participation, which is concurrent with calls in the AoIR 2012 ethics report. Since the results of the 2014 PNAS Facebook emotional contagion story were made public in the news media and scholarly circles, much of the discussion has centered on the ethics of the research under IRB guidelines. We contend that researchers must pay attention to how the manipulation of algorithms in over 600,000 Facebook newsfeeds resulted in swaying the emotions of people. Non-human language objects, in this case, algorithms, persuaded people to certain emotional states. Thus, we are interested in how such a study lends itself to the imaginary of rhetorical agency as described herein. How do Twitter bots challenge researchers to make ethical decisions about the bot's roles as participants in the research process? Do bots enact agency and/persuasion, which lead people to shift their thoughts, beliefs or feelings from the interaction with the bots? If so, how might Internet researchers account for this non-human rhetorical agency and persuasion in their research?

We will close this collaborative talk with specific ethical questions related to computer code and bots, and will ask for audience member participation to establish guidelines for treating Twitter bots and other types of code as legitimate research participants in academic scholarship. There will be accessible print handouts as well as accessible information provided on a website for audience members to access during and after the talk.

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