

Workshop Proposal

Revisiting Research Ethics in the Facebook Era: Challenges in Emerging CSCW Research

In this short paper, we discuss some ethical questions that arose when recruiting study participants for a field-based, qualitative interview study. After a brief description of the study, we list arguments for and against the approach we took, and highlight some dilemmas we faced as our study recruitment unfolded.

Andrew L. Brooks is a Masters candidate at the University of California, Berkeley, School of Information. His research explores the intersection of human-computer interaction and economics, with an emphasis on the relationship between mobile information seeking and human behavior. Recent projects have examined social recommendations and consumer shopping behavior. He has recruited participants for both academic and corporate research projects. Prior to joining the School of Information he worked for a number of years in product management and related roles for a pair of Silicon Valley startups and a global interactive marketing services company. At all three of these companies he founded and directed efforts to recruit customers for participatory software and service design projects.

Elizabeth F. Churchill is a Principal Research Scientist at Yahoo! Research where she manages the Internet Experiences Group. Her current research focuses on Internet use in everyday life. Prior to joining Yahoo!, she worked at PARC, the Palo Alto Research Center in Palo Alto, CA, and at FX Palo Laboratory, Fuji Xerox's research lab in Palo Alto. She is the current VP of ACM SIGCHI. Elizabeth has long experience of recruiting research participants both on her own and using recruitment services. She also has considerable experience in managing processes for establishing informed consent, in working with corporate lawyers to address potential violations of Terms of Service and establishing legal and appropriate remuneration for study participation. These activities include screening and recruiting people for: focus groups; for experimental and usability labs studies; for survey participation and telephone interviews; for diary and beeper studies and for short and medium term field interviews and observations. She has also more recently been working with colleagues to analyze data scraped/mined from social sites.

Knowing Me, Knowing You: A Case Study of Social Networking Sites and Participant Recruitment

Andrew L. Brooks

School of Information
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA 94720 USA
andy@ischool.berkeley.edu

Elizabeth F. Churchill

Internet Experiences Group
Yahoo! Research
4301 Great America Parkway,
Santa Clara, CA 95054 USA
churchill@acm.org

Abstract

Social media technologies such as Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr are increasingly popular. For social scientists, these applications and services represent a goldmine of activity data and a rich source of study participants. In this short paper, we discuss some ethical questions that arose when recruiting study participants for a field-based, qualitative interview study. After a brief description of the study, we list arguments for and against the approach we took, and highlight some dilemmas we faced as our study recruitment unfolded.

Keywords

Research ethics, methods, recruiting, sampling, case study, social networking, privacy, screening

ACM Classification Keywords

K.4.1 Public Policy Issues, K.7.4 The Computing Profession

Introduction

Considered and considerate recruitment of participants for qualitative and quantitative studies has always been key to conducting good research. New social media technologies offer new sources and methods for recruiting study participants including email distribution

lists, social networking sites and services such as Facebook, Flickr, and Twitter.

Whether studies are qualitative or quantitative, predominantly online or offline, experimental or elaborative, selecting settings and participants who fit the study's criteria is crucial to the validity of results. It is also incumbent upon researchers to be transparent and informative about study goals and methods, and to be careful about participant well-being and privacy preferences [3][5][7][9][10]. Safeguarding study participants, researchers and institutional interests has led to the creation of elaborate consent forms and terms of service agreements between researchers and study participants [1][2][6] and detailed Institutional Review Board (IRB) recommendations governing the use of human participants in studies [11][12].



Figure 1. Publicly accessible Facebook profile showing researcher's friends.

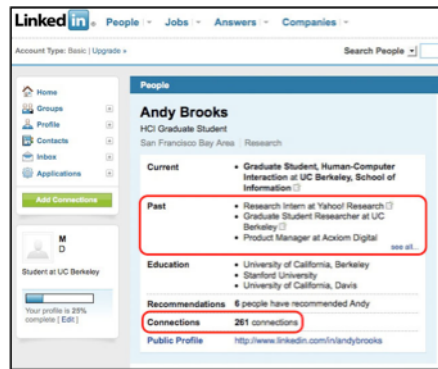


Figure 2. Publicly accessible LinkedIn profile showing researcher's past work experiences and number of connections.

Case Study

In addressing the workshop themes, we present our experiences recruiting participants for a field-based interview study of hotel concierges. Our study sought to show how concierges learn their craft, accumulate knowledge, deal with guest queries, and create activity and travel plans.

Recruiting Methodology

We considered numerous recruitment methods for our study: we posted advertisements on Craigslist and found little response; we sent emails to email distribution lists we subscribe to; we asked friends to recommend people they knew in the hospitality industry. None of these methods yielded any suitable participants. We explored approaching concierges during their work; however as part of our study we observed concierges at work and realized that such an

at-work solicitation would likely be ineffective; we observed that concierges were continually occupied with guest requests, and noted considerable management oversight and concern for professionalism on the part of concierges.

Given these challenges we turned to recruiting participants by searching Facebook and LinkedIn for suitable participants. We logged onto each site with our personal accounts and searched for "concierge". This method relied on individuals self-identifying themselves as concierges. Both sites returned numerous matches, which we compiled into a spreadsheet. For each potential participant we recorded their name, as well as their hotel if it was listed in the profile. We also acquired a publicly available list of concierges from the local concierge association web site¹ and searched both Facebook and LinkedIn for those individuals. We again added these individuals to our potential candidate spreadsheet, noting their name and hotel. Not all of these individuals identified themselves as concierges on these sites.

We merged these two spreadsheets, which revealed considerable information about our candidate pool as well as each candidate. The spreadsheet offered an approximate snapshot of the local concierge community, including age distribution, hotel name and class, and relationship status. Each candidate was sent a personalized recruitment message explaining the project, and how we identified them as a potential participant. These messages were sent through the service's messaging systems. The sending researcher's

¹ Northern California Concierge Association (NCCA). <http://www.nccaconcierge.org>

Knowledge of the Other through Data Mining

Pro

The data's already public; we have implied consent.

We could ask these things, but do not have time.

We can better screen candidates, improving sampling.

The data provides a more holistic view of participants.

Participants are more candid with researchers through knowing our previous work.

Con

Users probably do not think their data will be used this way.

Data gathered from such efforts may be false or misleading.

Researchers overlook good candidates by being *too* precise in sampling.

Publishing results with such data may make it easier to identify participants, causing harm.

May violate web sites' terms of service.

personal Facebook account was marked private, thus only his "friends" could view his/her detailed profile information. The researcher's LinkedIn account profile was not restricted in such a way. Eight of our 12 concierge participants were recruited with this method, while four were a balance of referrals from these participants and those recruited while at work.

Key Ethical Issue: Knowledge of the Other

We encountered three issues over the course of this study.

These issues centered on the *knowledge of the other*, such as the researcher knowing information about the study participant and the participant being unaware of the researcher having that knowledge, and vice versa. We also consider the impact of this knowledge on how researchers screen participants collected via snowball recruiting methods. We summarize the arguments for and against this *knowledge of the other* in Table 1.

Knowing Me

During our interviews a participant gave hints that s/he had viewed one of the researcher's Facebook profile or had searched for him on the Internet. This realization arose during our interview transcript analysis, and was not apparent during the interview. In both instances we were discomforted by this experience, and wondered what else the participant knew about us.

If the participant had viewed either or both of our profiles, how would this impact how they answered our questions? Perhaps they would feel more familiar with us, and be more candid. Or perhaps they would be wary of our motives and provide misleading information. Must we acknowledge these concerns in our findings?

Knowing You

We found it surprisingly easy to access detailed information profiles on people; it was an ethical choice to make clear boundaries about how much we would research before gaining participant permission and a clear sense of *their* desires about how much of their information was shared. It is unsettling to understand from recent research how technological developments in Flash cookies and HTTP cache-control headers coupled with easily available social networking data and make it eerily easy to develop detailed, rich profiles about people simply from their "casual" use of the Internet [4]. Are people aware of such technologies? Does a lack of user awareness provide us with "better" data?

From the outset of our recruiting efforts we were concerned how our methods may impact sampling, and how "incidental" knowledge we were privy to from their social networking presence may affect our analyses. We were relying on concierges self-identifying themselves, as well as a list provided by the association. We were concerned that we should have approached the Concierge Association for permission to use their member list. On reviewing search results we were able to see nearly all of our participants' profiles; few had restricted access. We saw status updates, lists of friends, photographs, and other information.

Does (the participant) posting this information on a public forum provide implied consent? How did viewing this information affect our sampling efforts? How can we *not* see things on a person's page? Even if we did not explicitly record this information for our study, did it have a subconscious impact on our analysis? At what point does reviewing a site with "incidental" or "peripheral" information become inappropriate?

Table 1. Arguments for and against *knowledge of the other*.

During our interviews we noted that a number of our participants explicitly requested anonymity lest their employers or the association discover their comments. Were others privy to our association via the social networking service features (wall postings, friending) and what potential affect may that have had?

Gimme Gimme Gimme

Two of our participants were snowball referrals from fellow participants. Before contacting these individuals we vetted their credentials by searching for them on social networking sites and via Internet search engines.

Of the provided referrals we selected those that we thought would best enhance our study, such as those of a different age group, level of experience, or hotel class than other participants. Should we have taken our participants' referrals on faith, and not checked their credentials? Is it simply doing due diligence? Does it make a difference whether we do this before or after their participation?

Conclusion

Email distribution lists, social networking sites and services such as Facebook, Flickr, and Twitter offer tremendous opportunities to recruit study participants and enrich study findings. However researchers must be ever mindful of ethical concerns and continue to protect participants from harm. Recognizing and addressing the implications of the *knowledge of the other* will improve research validity and protect study participants.

References

[1] American Anthropological Association Code of Ethics. <http://www.aaanet.org/issues/policy-advocacy/upload/AAA-Ethics-Code-2009.pdf>

[2] American Psychological Association. Human Research Protections. <http://www.apa.org/science/rcr/human.html>

[3] Bruckman, A. 2002. Studying the amateur artist: A perspective on disguising data collected inhuman subjects research on the Internet. *Ethics and Inf. Technol.* 4, 3 (Nov. 2002), 217-231.

[4] Gross, B. 2009. (Ab)using Identifiers: Indiscernibility of Identity. BayCHI talk, Nov. 2009, <http://www.baychi.org/calendar/20091110/>

[5] Hine, C. (Ed.). *Virtual methods: issues in social research on the internet*. Berg Publishers, Oxford, New York, NY, USA, 2005.

[6] Hudson, J. M. and Bruckman, A. 2005. Using empirical data to reason about internet research ethics. In *Proc. of the Ninth Conference on ESCCW 2005*. Springer-Verlag New York, New York, NY, 287-306.

[7] IEEE Code of Ethics. <http://www.ieee.org/portal/pages/iportals/aboutus/ethics/code.html>

[8] IRB Guidebook. U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services. http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/irb/irb_guidebook.htm

[9] Kleinberg, J. M. 2007. Challenges in mining social network data: processes, privacy, and paradoxes. In *Proc. of 13th ACM SIGKDD*. ACM, New York, NY, 4-5.

[10] Richardson, J. T. E. (Ed). *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods for Psychology and the Social Sciences*. Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, UK, 1996.

[11] Schrum, L., Ethical Research in the Information Age: Beginning the Dialog. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 13, 2 1996, pp. 117 - 122.

[12] UC Berkeley Committee for Protection of Human Subjects. <http://cphs.berkeley.edu/>