
The Emerging Ethics of Studying Social Media Use with a Heritage Twist

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Abstract

Researching the emerging culture of social media use raises a unique set of ethical research issues. There are also other ethical issues emerging within social media culture that are central to conducting ethical research online. Furthermore, it is worth considering how issues of ethics can also be linked to the heritage of a cultural phenomenon, like social media use, by looking at the value system innate to this culture.

Keywords

Social media, heritage, copyright, anonymizing, archiving, curating, value system.

Introduction

Academic research typically has a code of ethics to ensure that research participants are not harmed. However, my studies extend beyond traditional data gathering, focusing also on user-generated content]. On a meta-level, there are various types of ethical issues emerging from the culture of social media use that are specific to my content area, heritage research.

Heritage encompasses the values, practices, and artifacts that create and sustain our living culture. It can be defined as a cultural process of making meaning and value [2], and it is often viewed as a living system that guides our present social relations [1]. In this position paper, the first two sections examine case studies related to conducting ethical research. The last two sections examine emerging heritage-related phenomena that also inform online research ethics.

Fair Use for Research

In studying the use of social media during recent focusing events (e.g., 2007 VT shooting, Hurricane Katrina, 2008 presidential elections), our research lab examines user-generated content that is often, by default, copyrighted works. As researchers, we have more privilege to copy and use these works for “non-profit educational purposes.” Our intention is not to receive economic gains for republishing these works but instead to foster pedagogical reflection. Research is intended to promote knowledge by, for example, illustrating a point, providing commentary, or triggering a discussion about the copyrighted works. The fair use of such works for research purposes allows researchers the right to use them more flexibly without infringing upon copyright laws as long as the correct attribution to the original source is made.

However, the fair use of user-generated content is more complex and situational. For example, Facebook (like many other social networking sites) allows users to control what information or groups should be public or private. When our lab conducted online research on the use of Facebook after the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting, we mainly focused on VT-related Facebook groups that emerged. The only way we could access the Facebook content was to become a member on Facebook; therefore, this information was not entirely public as compared to a site like Twitter (since Twitter has a public stream that does not require people to login to see public tweets).

When we wrote a publication that included Facebook Wall Posts to show the emergence of collective intelligence, we decided to anonymize the data by not using the exact name of the people posting the content and altering each Wall Post so that it would not be directly searchable. Our initial intention was to respect the user's privacy and to recognize the gravity of the situation in which these Wall Posts were created. Also, anonymizing data is a common research practice to protect the participants from any undue harm. Still, we employed the semi-public data, which we believe would be covered under Fair Use laws for research purposes, but did not attribute the data to the creator by using their real or online name.

Request to Not Be Anonymous

Anonymity of research participants is a central feature of ethical research. Traditional research often uses anonymity practices as an ethical prerequisite or default because higher value is placed on protecting the participants' identities. This is often important outside of academic research; investigative journalists often

have anonymous sources to protect their identities. However, anonymity may not always be preferred as the default especially in a participatory culture, where people want to be attributed to the stories they publicly share. In other words, the shift from being consumers to being producers of information means that we now can and want to take credit for the content we produce. People, for example, can upload their content online and then use an open copyright system to allow others to easily credit their work, which gives individuals the tools to control how their content can be used.

In my informed consent form, research participants can choose whether they want me to use their real name or a pseudonym for any content they create for my research. They can also choose whether they want their content to be public or remain private but still be used for research purposes. A majority of my participants have chosen to use their real names. The assumption as a researcher and as a participant is that using their real names will not only facilitate direct attribution of their own ideas and thoughts but this would also allow their contributions to my research be searchable for others to see and reference, if they want their data to be publicly accessible.

There were a few participants who chose to remain anonymous and requested that their content not be reused publicly. This was in part because they wanted to protect any potential harm or backlash against others because of the knowledge they have on a particular subject. For example, one of my participants has extensive knowledge and forensic evidence in regards to the environmental and health issues that emerged during the clean-up efforts after the 2001 World Trade Center attacks. This environmental issue

has been a controversial issue, making it important that I protect my participant's identity. Still, it is difficult to predict the unanticipated consequences from participating in research projects. However, most of the content that I ask my participants about is already publicly available by their own means. I initially contacted them because their publicly available data was relevant to my research questions.

Fair Use in Social Media Sites

Uploading screenshots of TV news reports about a disaster has become an emergent practice on social media sites like Flickr. People often upload these screenshot images as the disaster is happening; however, some people are concerned with how this practice may be infringing upon copyright laws.

For example, in the "London Bomb Blast Community" Flickr group, a discussion called "Screenshots/grabs & copyrighted images" was started by the group administrator nine days after the 2005 London Bomb attacks. He first posted, "I have started to strip out all obvious screenshots/grabs and copyrighted images to ensure the group is both relevant and 'legal'." Other Flickr members replied with valid explanations for uploading and/or deleting screenshots. One person stated, "Those 'low-quality captures' of Sky News and other news channels pulled over 219,000 views from people trying to keep up with that day's events. Most of whom did not have access to a TV or radio at the time and found them useful as noted in the comments and on the Guardian website." Another stated, "I deleted mine (even one with more than 13,000 hits, closing in on 14K) because I felt it was ephemeral and not my creation." Still other Flickr users pointed out, "They represent something that was timely and of the

moment (in that you can't take those grabs again now, and they'll document history) but they also represent visual media that is outside the scope of Flickr (in an empirical sense)." At the end of this discussion, the admin replied back, "They were informative and creditworthy at the time, it's just that they have passed their sell by date now and we are trying to concentrate on original pics from Flickr members."

Multiple issues related to ethics can be discussed within this case study. Ethical concerns often seem to be bound up or conflated with legal issues; however, ethical decisions are not guided by laws. In this case, the group admin wanted to be legally cautious given his role and his control over what content appears in the group. He used the group discussion feature in Flickr not only to inform others about his decision but also to allow others to share their opinions.

The group admin was concerned about the legality of these screenshots; however, the discussion that emerged was one that relates more to the ethical decisions that could be made in regards to posting these images. Sometimes the value of these screenshots were not determined ahead of time but rather emerged in situ. For example, people commented on how the screenshots were informative for people who did not have access to a TV while others chose to take a screenshot and share it because it captured a historical, ephemeral moment related to that event. Therefore, ethical decisions were made on an ad hoc and post hoc basis. The discussion also shifted to the cultural expectations of Flickr as a place to find "amateur" or personal photos and to see first hand accounts. Since it supports a citizen photojournalism culture, people seem to expect more

raw footage. However, some might argue that taking screenshots of TV news captures the experience of the many people who get their news from TV. Therefore, the value system emerging from social media sites is one that values the open sharing of voices from people on the ground and raw footage from citizens. This emerging value system will become increasingly central to the ethical debates of social media use.

Archiving and Curating for Posterity

Social media practices are becoming a central aspect of the participatory culture, which I view as part of the living heritage of this networked world. People increasingly have the opportunity to write themselves into history as well as curate what they think is most meaningful to preserve for future generations. This process of deciding what part of history gets preserved and how it gets passed on for posterity's sake can be likened to the role of archivists and curators. With the increasing amount of content producers and user-generated content in the digital context, we increasingly face a problem of not only information overload but also "curatorial overload: too much information, too difficult to organize and retrieve" [1].

Archiving massive amounts of social media content has proven to be quite difficult. For example, the Terms of Service for Facebook prohibits the use of robots and spiders unless you obtain permission from Facebook. Tweets on Twitter are becoming more ephemeral and now only exist in the public stream for seven days, although the Tweets can be saved individually using RSS aggregation feeds. Yet, Flickr and YouTube are sites that are meant for archiving user-generated content. Citizen archivists and curators are beginning to emerge especially around event-specific content, such

as people aggregating content after the 2009 Iran Elections. However, it will become more difficult to manually archive and curate massive amounts of user-generated content. Therefore, what ethical issues arise from automatically archiving and curating (e.g., authenticating, collecting, organizing, exhibiting, re-presenting) user-generated content from social media sites? Who has the right to use, reuse, and manipulate this publicly available content? Is it the content creator, the content provider, or the society-at-large?

Conclusion

Conducting ethical research online is inherently intertwined with the emerging ethical issues with online practice more broadly. As I conduct research about new heritage practices emerging from the social media culture, I concurrently consider the ethics emerging from this culture, namely the moral principles and value systems that make up the living heritage system of social media culture.

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Cover Letter

As a PhD candidate conducting interdisciplinary research, I draw from studies in crisis informatics, cultural heritage informatics, technology design, new media, and digital memory. Social media are rapidly changing the way people traditionally construct, share, and experience memories especially those generated from focusing events like major crises or disasters. Such events often assume cultural significance, and we tend to recognize them as historical events that are worth remembering and sharing with present and future generations. With the emerging use of social media during these events, new kinds of heritage practices are emerging. My research goal is not only to suggest how new media can be used to sustain heritage as a living system but also to investigate a new kind of heritage practice emerging from the participatory culture specifically around the use of social media during crises. Four questions guide my interdisciplinary research study. How is the notion of heritage changing in a participatory age? What kind of heritage is emerging from social media use in the crisis context? How can tools be designed to support the living heritage system through socially distributed curation? How can the "social media probes" method be offered and used for future technology design research? Using ethnographic methods and drawing from the technology design literature, I use a variant design method called "social media probes" to generate data that will inspire new design spaces by provoking my participants to consider current cultural practices in a new way. I also use aspects of "reflective design" with myself, as the researcher, and with my participants to more deeply understand and reflect on the values of the users and designers in my research process. I believe my heritage perspective to investigating the meanings and values emerging from social media practices provides a unique approach to unpacking the ethical issues with online research.