

Social media research: issues of experience in RECs



2nd May 2017
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Introduction

- Focus on committee members lack of experience of social media
- What are the factors influencing this? What are the implications for both committee members and researchers? Is it problem?
- Drawing on data from:
 - REC interviews
 - Researcher interviews

Reviewing social media research

- In most cases, experience reviewing social media research was limited due to low number of proposals coming through for review
- Little research using SM coming through for review, which means little need to consider the ethics of this kind of research.

***Interviewee 14:** I'm not because to be honest I've worked on a kind of need to know basis and I've not needed to know about any of this stuff. [...] now, I'm starting to encounter some of the literature on this which is mentioning guidelines and so on but I've not got to grips with any of that yet at all.*

Lack of personal and professional experience

- Only 4 interviewees stated that they use SM data in their own research and 14/19 stated that they did not use SM data in a personal capacity either

***Interviewee 1:** I might be in fact the worst person to interview but -- because I don't have any social media account. I never use social media account [...] I don't even know what options are available today; there is like gazillion of things out there. Obviously, I know Facebook and Twitter -- and what's that the one that you share pictures -- Instagram. But kind of like those things are the ones that I only know from day-to-day life. I never use any of them; I never did any research on them.*

Lack of institutional/ departmental SM specific ethical guidelines

- In addition to the this lack of experience, participants reported that institutional guidelines for the use of social media in research were either non-existent or in the process of being developed and implemented.
- This was often described as an ongoing process, prompted by a rise in the number of such applications coming through for review.

***Interviewee 11:** I think more likely, step by step that some of the things that we decided on case by case basis may become more formalized, such that we can actually can give people advice of this would be acceptable, this wouldn't or have you thought about something else. And I think that just comes from the committees having more experience*

Fluidity of social media platforms

- Eight participants pointed out that these platforms are constantly changing and that each is different. Therefore, any experience is likely to be valid for only a short period of time.
- Therefore, set guidelines may not always be practical or desirable in such fast-changing research contexts

***Interviewee 1:** And then some other social media comes the next day, and it's a completely different way of dealing with it and you don't know. [...] because eventually if you enforce something, then it's going to be completely irrelevant in some other context and then it's going to cause a trouble rather than help you. But it may not be helpful in two years, so you just have to sit down and think about all the ethics; it is going to be very unnecessary process to me.*

Implications: REC perspectives

- The lack of both personal and professional experience of social media had implications for the extent to which committee members felt they had sufficient knowledge to provide expert opinion on research which uses social media data:

***Interviewee 2:** Okay. I feel slightly -- so, I'm the wrong person for you to -- to be enrolled in this, really. I have absolutely nothing to do with social media.*

***Interviewee 3:** I personally don't get involved with any social media directly, but it is used. I have to say I'm too old --- I'm not up with social media. I don't use it personally either so I'm not actually the right person in some ways. Some of my younger colleagues --*

Implications: REC perspectives

- Some also suggested that this impacted on their ability as reviewers:

***Interviewee 10:** So, I think that's certainly a big concern and I just don't know if I got an application from someone who wants to use the dark web I would have to take advice, I wouldn't know quite what I was judging, but you know, I know I don't know so it's a kind of a known unknown.*

Implications: researcher perspectives

- Most researchers felt there was a lack of experience but the extent to which this was perceived to be a problem varied.
- Several interviewees suggested that researchers, as well as the committee, were responsible for thinking through the issues. Consequently, committees did not need to be experts on the ethics of social media research

***Researcher 7:** Yeah, I think you can't guarantee that any research ethics committee will have expertise in the kind of research you do, I think it's kind of naïve to expect that but in my experience, research ethics committees will ask researchers to explain [...] and then researchers can explain why they think this approach is appropriate rather than that approach, you know, in the face of any kind of issues that the ethics committee might be concerned about.*

Implications: researcher perspectives

- However, the majority of the interviewees expressed reservations about REC committees' lack of experience and their ability to review research which uses SM data
- Researchers suggested that committee members who lack experience tended to be overly cautious and make uninformed comments

***Researcher 2:** the committee that's looking at it [the proposal] should include people with expertise in social media research or at least knowledge of the issue. So because it's -- because otherwise, you can end up getting comments and requirements and ethical requirements that are meaningless or unnecessary, which has certainly been the experience of well, myself and certainly my colleagues*

Does lack experience equal lack of expertise?

- Findings suggest that lack of experience can be a problem:
 - Committee members lack sufficient knowledge on which to make informed decisions
 - Less experience= more cautious, limiting for researchers
- Field in flux- just part of a process/ necessary stage in the development of new research methods?
- What can committees and researchers do?
 - Nothing- platforms constantly in a state of change anyway
 - Subject all SM research to ethical review
 - Engage in a dialogue with researchers using social media- sharing expertise

Questions/ discussion?

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