Direct contacts with potential interviewees when carrying out online ethnography on controversial and polarized topics: a loophole in ethics guidelines.

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Abstract

Direct contacts with research participants in online ethnography are an important tool to better understand complex social dynamics in cyberspace. The current ethical approaches guiding academic research, however, can be problematic in this regard, creating unintended tensions leading to potential research biases as well as safety and wellbeing issues for researchers working on controversial and polarized topics. The onus, we argue, ends up being on academics to protect and separate the personal information available about them online from the professional, trying to overcome what seems to be an inevitable blurring of boundaries. In this research note, we present two case studies to highlight what we perceive as a loophole in current ethics guidelines.

Keywords

Online ethnography; interviews; ethics; researcher safety; social media

Introduction

Social scientists, and criminologists among them, are increasingly using social media data in research. Although the focus and the examples used in this research note are from criminology, the issues we want to raise apply to online ethnography in other substantive fields: in a context of expanding "digital positivism" based on big data research methods (and, in our disciplinary field, the expansion of computational criminology) in online research, it is important to retain a space for qualitative analyses of smaller datasets enabling interpretative and critical approaches (Halford et al. 2018; Fuchs, 2019). Online ethnography, in its various declinations, is a methodological approach that can be used to this end. Online ethnography stresses the importance, whenever possible, to go beyond what is observable on the screen and combine systematic observation online with direct contacts of relevant social actors (Androutsopoulos, 2008; Kozinets, 2010).

Ethical standards for online research are under development and refinement, yet still vary among disciplines and jurisdictions. Nonetheless, there are some best practices currently recognised as the right approaches to do “ethically-informed” research (Zimmer & Kinder-Kurlanda, 2017), and institutional ethical boards and academic societies have developed guidelines for researchers gathering data online (BSA, 2017; Williams et al., 2017; Social Data Lab, 2019). For online data collection (including manual collection, and even if data is anonymised at the moment of collection or only research notes taken because socially sensitive information is discussed) there are a number of limitations researchers have to comply with: for instance, passive observation is generally allowed only in “public” online spaces; deception is usually forbidden or discouraged in practice, making active ethnography and direct contact with research participants challenging.

Research frameworks and ethical standards traditionally used by researchers and ethical boards, we argue, are at times inadequate to respond to some of the challenges and possibilities of online research. With our research note, we aim to open a dialogue on what we perceive to be an ethical loophole creating difficult and vexing tensions for researchers working on sensitive (because they tend to be controversial or polarized) yet important topics, forcing a false dichotomy between the need to improve the quality of unbiased data and protect researchers’ safety and wellbeing, while guaranteeing proper ethical standards to protect the rights of research participants.

Background

Case Study I

Dr [NAME] has been working over the last five years on social harms deriving from the online propagation of health-related misinformation. In the context of the 2020 pandemic, she has been conducting a virtual ethnography looking at the narratives and conversations occurring in self-identifying “alternative lifestyle” and counterinformation Italian-speaking online communities discussing and spreading potentially dangerous medical (dis/mis) information. Without lingering on details unnecessary for the scope of this research note, it is nonetheless worth stressing that these groups tend to have strong, negative opinions towards institutionalized forms of knowledge (including public Universities and academics seen as

"part of the system"). They often embrace conspiratorial thinking, and clearly do not trust anything perceived as imposed, official, or formal (NAME 2017) – let alone reading lengthy information sheets and signing consent forms (even if they can be extremely open in discussing personal details online, the main reason why only research notes were taken during the passive ethnography to avoid any collection and storage of sensitive data).

After having carried out several months of passive observation over a number of online settings, the researcher's plan was to complement her data with narrative interviews (Schütze 1983), in order to provide opportunity to the research participants to narrate their own stories, experiences and motivation to the researcher-listener. The researcher obtained separate ethical approval to conduct these interviews: the usual recruitment text, information sheet, consent form and interview script were checked and agreed by ethics reviewers; in addition, as the information sheet broadly mentioned "a study on health-related online discussions in the context of Covid-19" (as it would have been impossible to approach the designated respondents presenting the study as research on misinformation), the researcher was asked to make respondents sign a debriefing form at the end. After that, respondents would have had seven days to withdraw.

Recruitment through social media, such as Facebook, is considered a cost-efficient methodology to recruit otherwise hard-to-reach populations (Weiner et al., 2017). Through social media private messaging and after "blinding" all her social media accounts, at the time of writing the researcher contacted 30 administrators and moderators of social media groups and pages pivoting around (and disseminating) potentially harmful health-related misinformation. The researcher decided to not contact individuals without a specific "formal" role in the social media observed as she didn't want them to feel somehow ambushed in what was clearly a safe space for them. The researcher also decided from the outset to not contact some notorious and highly visible (but confrontational) individuals openly promoting medical misinformation, who enjoy a guru-like status among their active and at times verbally aggressive followers – as observed during the passive ethnography. So far, she's received nine replies, and did one oral interview (with one interviewer used to public interviews, one of the "borderline" cases of interest as he divulges some controversial information), and one interview in written form (but the signature of the debriefing form is still pending). Out of these nine, four were uninterested and/or mentioned privacy concerns (in one case, after having seen part of the interview script); three would have been happy to

83 talk, but not to sign the consent form; one requested further information and tried to friend
84 the researcher on her personal Facebook page, and disappeared when the researcher would
85 not accept his friendship request. One sent distressing messages, trying to suggest that he
86 "knew" the researcher, attempting to groom her into entering his spiritualistic group, with
87 social engineering techniques pivoting on his perceptions of the researcher's personal life
88 experience.
89
90 ***Case Study II***
91
92 Dr [NAME] has been undertaking research into the online incel (involuntary celibate)
93 community since 2017. Incels are predominantly men who have been unsuccessful in
94 attaining romantic relationships with women and are aggrieved with what they perceive to be
95 reasons behind these failures – particularly feminism, society and biology. Renowned for
96 their deeply misogynistic views and associations with extremism and terrorism, incels are
97 increasingly receiving media and scholarly attention (Nagle 2017; Marwick & Caplan, 2018;
98 Ging, 2019), yet there is little qualitative understanding about their evolution and growth.
99 Incels are considered particularly dangerous since they were associated with a series of
100 killings committed in Isla Vista (2014), Oregon (2015), Edmonton (2016), Aztec (2017),
101 Parkland (2018), Toronto (2018), and Tallahassee (2018). This threat is seen as spreading to
102 Europe, and experts suggest it is only a matter of time before the UK witnesses a violent
103 attack by someone identifying as incel (Hoffman et al., 2020). To explore how incel cultures
104 and networks are enabling misogynistic extremist and violent behaviours online, the
105 researcher employed an online ethnographic approach (netnography, see Kozinets, 2010)
106 relying on non-participant observation and thematic analysis of publicly available forum
107 discussions, videos and comments on social media platforms.
108
109 However, the researcher was also keen to obtain first-hand insight as to why incels self-
110 identify as so, and what motivated them to join the community. This knowledge was
111 unattainable via purely observational means and necessitated methods directly engaging
112 incels. Due to wanting to obtain rich qualitative data, an online survey was deemed
113 inappropriate, and would most likely not have been able to be administered properly on incel
114 sites anyway due to the hostility in these environments; as such semi-structured interviews
115 with self-identified incels were decided upon. Participants were identified from snowball and
116 convenience sampling. Initially, the researcher was contacted via her university email by

incels of their own accord who had seen her quoted in a national newspaper story about them. This was before the researcher had decided to supplement her existing online research with interviews. After designing the interview study and procuring university ethical approval, three of these contacts were happy to participate in the research. This is a positive outcome from a situation that the researcher originally held much trepidation about, namely being so publicly visible when associated with polarizing topics and groups known for their hateful actions. Unbeknownst to the researcher, her quotation also ended up cited on the incel Wikipedia page (she found out from incels who contacted her). Additionally, the researcher was compelled to advertise her research interests on her public university profile. Although all of this information available in the public sphere worked in her favour in obtaining some interview participants, it also drew in unsolicited messages from men's rights supporters, questioning her credibility as an academic, and propagating their ideological grooming.

This research followed approved traditional ethical procedures regarding the netnography and specifically the issue of using online user generated content without attempting to contact the communities – which is considered the safest course of action for the researcher given the topic being investigated and the reputation that sites which incels frequent have for trolling and abuse (NAME et al. 2016). As regards the interviews, the usual forms for informed consent via participant information sheet, consent form and debrief were agreed by the ethics board, informed by the underlying principles of interviewees' privacy and confidentiality, and the anonymisation of their data. Also in this case, however, the researcher had to be open about her identity and institution. Given the community being researched, potential intrusions into her personal online spaces caused concerns for safety and security.

Discussion

The case studies presented show that, by not affording researchers to conceal their identities and /or by asking them to fully disclose their research aim when undertaking online interviews with contentious groups, tensions are created, affecting both the quality of the research and the safety and wellbeing of researchers themselves, especially considering the extensive amount of information about us as academics available in the public domain (and the encouragement to do and be "public sociology-ists" and "public criminology/-ists").

150 These tensions affect power dynamics, conflicting agendas, and researchers' private and
151 public selves.
152
153 ***Power dynamics***
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155 Ethical concerns around interviews tend to assume that the interviewer is in the stronger
156 position. Power asymmetries, however, do not always work in this direction (Jacobsson and
157 Åkerström 2012), and there are study-specific and researcher-specific situational and
158 (sub)cultural concerns that should not be overlooked. Because of the egalitarian nature of
159 online communication researchers can face an additional difficulty to define their own status,
160 shaking their traditional position of authority (Sade-Beck 2004). This aspect is further
161 amplified when intended interviewees are part of a category considered oppositional to
162 institutionalized knowledge, universities and the like (as in case Study I), or when they see
163 the researcher as "inferior" due to her gender (as in Case Study II).
164
165 Power dynamics online can also be squarely in the participant's favour when they benefit
166 from extended anonymity and thus they can remain anonymous to the researcher, aside from
167 their username (often a fantasy name or alias – as encountered in both Case Studies) and
168 avatar. However, participants will know researchers' true identities and, starting from there,
169 they are able to find out other information.
170
171 ***Conflicting agendas***
172
173 From a constructionist point of view, through interviews we mutually co-construct meaning
174 (Holstein and Gubrium 2016; Silverman 2017). These meanings are also shaped by the
175 interviewees' "frame of orientation" – a system or network of different implicit attitudes,
176 brought from outside into the interview setting (Philipps and Mrowczynski 2019). In fact,
177 interviewees not only narrate biographic events or processes, but they make argumentative
178 and evaluative statements (Philipps and Mrowczynski 2019), especially when trying to
179 convince the researcher to adopt or prefer a certain interpretation of construction of meaning
180 when facing a controversial or polarized topic to further their own agenda.
181
182 Participants' frame of orientation can be strongly impacted by the fact that they are in the
183 position to easily discover researchers' arguments (for instance, by looking at previously

published studies), and from there make assumptions about the researchers' own research agenda and their worldview, impacting upon the manner in which they interact with us (if at all) and the research. In our studies, we took some precautions (for instance, in Case Study I the researcher deleted the name of her latest publication with the word "misinformation" in the title from her institutional signature when emailing participants; both researchers carefully changed publicly visible parts of the social media accounts they use in a semi-professional way), but clearly that was not enough (in Case Study II, for instance, although none of the participants professed to googling the researcher, some of the discussions she had with them indicated they had, because they made inferences as to her opinion on certain issues due to her political stance and beliefs).

Furthermore, interviewees are more or less explicitly chosen by researchers as members (or perceived members) of a specific social category. When it comes to polarized or controversial topics, however, some interviewees would not consider themselves in the category intended by the researcher (Jacobsson and Åkerström 2012) or, if they accept being categorized in a certain way, only might do so by attributing that category a completely different meaning as they do not agree (or are likely to disagree) with the interpretation provided by the researcher. In Case Study I, for instance, none of the intended interviewees would recognise themselves as potentially harmful promoters of medical misinformation. For them, denying being part of this very category (as they consider themselves, for instance, those offering "better cures" or being the "real, open-minded scientists") is a fundamental feature of how they present themselves publicly, of how they construct their identities. Hence, not only the researchers' identities but also being (too) explicit about research aims with the interviewees impedes participation from the outset or prompts withdrawal or, in the best-case scenario, impacts participants' frame of orientation.

Researchers' private and public selves

Another tension directly impacts researchers' safety and wellbeing, closely related to the challenge of creating boundaries online, where identity is fluid and walls are generally missing (Donath, 2014). Academics have private lives, and some decide to keep an online presence to keep in touch with family and friends. Even if we are very careful not to disclose unnecessary information about ourselves online, "blinding" at the best of our possibilities our online presence, when approaching interviewees in sensitive online settings with our true

218 names we are *de facto* exposing ourselves and our beloved ones to potential abuse and
219 unwanted attention. While we might never know what the people we are conversing with
220 look like or their real names, from knowing our names and the university we work for they
221 can easily access images of us and potentially even discover where we live, our family
222 members and friends. For those academics who have unusual names, the possibility of
223 personal information being accessed is even more of a risk. In both case studies, intended
224 interviewees showed no respect of personal boundaries: both researchers, for instance,
225 received attempts to be friended or followed via social media by research participants and
226 messages/attempted calls at times clearly out of working hours.
227
228 Furthermore, academics increasingly have a public online presence. They are expected, for
229 instance, to have media visibility to enhance professional reputation and increase impact.
230 However, this not only creates a tension (in the context of Case Study I, for instance, the
231 researcher had to keep a low profile on social media and not publicly comment on the
232 propagation of medical misinformation during the 2020 pandemic to avoid attracting
233 attention from potential research participants), but also exposes the researcher to potential
234 abuse and unwanted attention (pertinent in the context of Case Study II, when the researcher
235 had participants trying to track down her personal Facebook profile in order to communicate
236 with her there, whilst another requested to follow her personal (private) Instagram account).
237 Female scholars have voiced concerns about their experiences with online harassment,
238 especially those who work in this field (see Chess and Shaw, 2015; Barlow and Awan, 2016).
239 As highlighted by Chess and Shaw, while research on online harassment increases awareness,
240 it also exposes scholars to the very harassment they are studying.
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242
243 **Concluding thoughts**
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245 Though there has been much work addressing the nuances of the public/privateness of the
246 online environment, including in the context of online interviewing (see, for instance,
247 Fielding and Lee, 1991; Hine, 2004; O'Connor et al., 2008; Salmons, 2009, 2011, 2014;
248 James and Busher, 2016), less attention has been afforded to whether application of
249 traditional ethical principles is appropriate for online interviewing in highly controversial and
250 polarized topics, or in contexts where the interviewers might be exposed to risks directly
251 linked to their role as researchers. As researchers we have a duty of care to protect our

participants from harm, but should this be at the expense of us, particularly when the risk of harm to our participants is minimal. As such, we believe that when it comes to having direct contacts online in sensitive interviewing and ethnographic settings current ethics guidelines leave a loophole that insufficiently protects researchers, discourages contact with potentially problematic interviewees, and might unintendedly create research biases.

We believe that – while guaranteeing sound ethical standards to protect our research participants' anonymity and confidentiality, and their data – a more flexible approach should be allowed by Research Ethics Committees (REC, or Institutional Review Board, IRB, in the US). For this, we might learn from the work and the standards used in investigative journalism, a discipline that still has to comply with stringent ethical standards, but allows more flexibility in light of public interest – and we claim that our research has public interest, even if carried out with the tools of academic researchers rather than journalists. For instance, according to the NUJ's *Code of Conduct* (considered the reference point for UK and Irish journalism for ethical practice), journalists have to avoid subterfuge; however, the same Code clarifies that guidelines can be breached for overriding consideration of the public interest (including "exposing crime or serious impropriety" – what we would call harmful behaviour, in criminological terms), as the public interest is viewed as a strong ethical principle in itself. In Italy, the country at the core of Case Study I, the *Consolidated text of the duties of the journalist* (entered into force in 2016 and updated in 2019) harmonises previous documents on ethical rules relating to the exercise of the profession of journalism. According to these guidelines, journalists are excused from divulging their identity, profession or data collection aim when this might entail "risk for their safety, or make impossible their information aim" (art. 2.1). These more flexible approaches have allowed journalists to carry out fundamental inquiries (e.g., Bartlett, 2014) shedding light on harmful online groups and subcultures. For academics, not being granted the same ethical resilience means that opportunities to make significant contributions in tackling online social issues are to be lost.

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