Social Media Research & Ethics

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[MUSIC PLAYING] [Social Media Research & Ethics]

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND: So my name is Leanne Townsend, and I work in the sociology department at the University of Aberdeen. [Dr. Leanne Townsend, Honorary Research Fellow, University of Aberdeen] My research interest, broadly speaking, is within digital sociology. And over the last couple of years, I’ve been working on research looking at the ethics of using social media data in research. [An Introduction to Social Media & Research Ethics] In our project, we were interested in looking at the ethics of using social media data in research.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: So, over the last 10 or so years, social media platforms have really exploded in terms of the number of platforms there are, but also in terms of how many people are using those platforms. And this presents a really valuable opportunity for researchers to access potentially very large data sets of very rich, naturally occurring data.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: And over the last few years, researchers have really started to take advantage of this opportunity. So this is potentially very fantastic, but it presents also some really interesting questions around the ethics of how we go about using that data. So traditionally, our research has followed a sort of set framework of ethics, looking at things like informed consent and anonymity.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: But it’s very hard sometimes to apply those traditional ethics to social media contexts. [Why do researchers need ethical guidance when using social media data?] So because this is a fairly new research context for researchers to work in, a relatively new field, we need to really produce some new ethical guidance for those researches.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: And because this is quite a new field, there isn’t really a clear ethical framework for researchers to follow as yet. Some guidance has been produced over the past decade or so looking at the ethics of using internet data more broadly, such as forum data and things like that, but some of this guidance is a bit outdated now, and not very applicable to current social media contexts.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: [What are the key areas of concern within social media research?] So there’s a number of key concerns that come up when we think about the ethics of using social media data in our research. And the first of these is whether or not we can consider this data to be public or private.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: And in some cases, depending upon the platform, they’ve often agreed to a set of terms and conditions stating that their data will be used by third parties, including researchers. But I think many of us know that people don’t always read the terms and conditions. So other people would argue that whether or not the data is public or private really very much depends upon the context of the data.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: So for example, posting something in an open debate or discussion taking place on Twitter can be considered more in the public realm, whereas people that are posting within, say, a private or closed Facebook group, where you might have to either become a member or have a password, that data might be considered more as private data.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: And questions around whether we consider the data public or private really inform the approach that we then take to whether or not we have to seek informed consent from the users of the social media platforms. So the next key concern within the ethics of using social media data and research is acquiring informed consent. Now, with more traditional research methodologies, often seeking informed consent is built into the design of the research itself.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: But when we access data sets from social media platforms, in many, or even in most cases, the users of those platforms don’t know. They’re not aware that their data is being used by us as researchers. So informed consent isn’t present at that stage. Now, whether or not we need to seek informed consent might depend more or less upon certain situations.
DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: So, are we working with data that could be considered private. As I mentioned previously, if there’s an expectation on the part of the social media user that what they wrote, what they put into that platform would be within a certain group, then it’s important that we seek consent from that user before we reuse their data.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: It’s also important to consider whether or not we’re working with sensitive data. For example, are the users talking about things that might bring risk to them if that data is exposed into new contexts or to new audiences. So for example, are people talking about illegal activities, are they talking about their financial status, or their marital status, or anything that might be potentially sensitive.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: If so, it might be important that we seek consent before we reuse their data. But obviously, this is quite difficult when we’re working with very, very large data sets, so we also have to consider how we’re using the data. Are we just aggregating the data together and analyzing it and presenting statistical results, for example, or are we wanting to cite individual tweets, individual units of data.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: So those are the kinds of things to consider. Another important area is whether we think that we’re working with children or people who are considered to be vulnerable adults, in which case, again, we have to consider this issue more seriously. So, anonymity is another critical factor of the ethics of social media research, and indeed of all research that we carry out.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: And this is something that is, again, perhaps more problematic with social media research than it is with more traditional forms of data collection. Again, anonymising participants is often built into the way that we deal with data in more traditional research, but it becomes more difficult with social media data.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: So it might be that we don’t give the name of the person when we reuse their data in papers, in conference presentations, and so on. But if we use the unit of data that was presented on the platform in its original wording, quite often that can be used to trace back to the owner of that social media data, or that person’s profile.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: So for example, if you present a tweet word for word in its original format, then somebody might be able to type that into Google, and it would take you straight to the profile of that Twitter user. So you can see that anonymity becomes problematic with social media research. So, in terms of how we go about doing that, we also have to pay attention to the terms and conditions of the platform that we’re actually accessing the data from, because all of these platforms have different sets of terms and conditions.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: And they change them regularly, as well. So you have to keep on top of those changes. So for example, some platforms stipulate that you can’t reword units of data if you’re going to use them in your outputs, and that you have to use them word for word, which makes it even more difficult for us to protect the anonymity of those users.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: Protecting anonymity of users, then, might be more important, again, going back to whether or not that user had an expectation of privacy in the situation that they were posting in, and, again, going back to whether or not this data can be considered sensitive, whether it maybe places them under any risk of harm when exposing this data in a new context.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: And again, whether we’re potentially working with the data that was created by children or vulnerable adults. So, as researchers, we have a responsibility to make sure that, when we’re using the data of social media users in our research, that we do not place those people under any risk of harm. And in order to make sure that we are protecting our participants from this risk of harm, we have to think about the nature of the data itself and the context which we took the data from.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: So this means that we have to revisit the other concerns. We have to think about whether or not the data was considered private or public by the people who posted it originally. We have to think about whether the data might have been produced by children or people that we might consider to be vulnerable, or perhaps not of sound mind.
DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: And perhaps more importantly, we have to consider whether the data is sensitive. So if the data might expose the social media user to embarrassment, or even prosecution, or the potential for them to lose their job, or for damage to their relationships, then in those situations we have to think about how we go about protecting them from that.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: Do we have to seek consent, be careful about making sure that the data is anonymised, or perhaps in some more extreme cases consider not using that data at all in our research. And these concerns also will be dictated to some degree depending upon how we wish to use the data. So if we're just analyzing the data but not reporting that data back in our outputs word for word, perhaps that's less risky.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: But if we want to provide quotes and cite the data in its original format, then that potentially is more risky for our participants. [A Framework For Ethical Research With Social Media Data] So in light of the concerns that I've introduced in terms of social media data, we as researchers at the University of Aberdeen were tasked with producing a new ethical framework that researchers at all stages of their career could follow in order to ensure an ethical approach to their research with social media data.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: So in February of 2016, we ran a two-day workshop in Aberdeen. We invited some of the key scholars and thinkers in this field to come along and help us to basically co-develop a new ethical framework for people to work through who are working with social media data.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: This framework is designed for use by anyone from undergraduate students right up to professors and so on. So the first part of the framework deals with the sort of legal and terms and conditions aspects of social media data. So before we can really think about the ethics from the participant's point of view, we have to be sure that we've read the specific terms and conditions of the platform itself, and that we're also up to speed with any legal requirements around the use of social media data, any disciplinary requirements, or any requirements that are set out by our place of work, such as the university that we work in, and our department and so on.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: And that we've spoken with our specific ethics board within our place of work. OK, so the next step in working through this framework is to decide whether or not the data that you want to work with should be considered as public or private. And here, a key question that you could ask yourself is, do the social media users reasonably expect to be observed by strangers.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: So to answer this question, you need to go back to the social media setting. Is it an open public space, such as within Twitter, or is this data being presented in a closed group? For example, a closed or secret group within Facebook, or a discussion forum online in which you have to register or gain a password to enter the space.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: So these are the issues that you need to consider when deciding how or whether to use the data. You might also want to take into consideration your own role as a researcher, and whether or not you are participating in these conversations online, as well. Is there a blurring of boundaries between researcher and participant?
DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: Are you taking part in the conversation? And if so, are you doing so openly as a researcher that's seeking data, or are you doing so as another social media user with an interest in the discussion taking place? In which case, you really need to think about the ethics of contributing to that conversation and, in some cases, perhaps guiding the conversation for your own purposes as a researcher, and whether or not to disclose your main purpose for participation in that group.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: Once you've determined whether or not you can consider the data as public or private, you need to also consider whether or not the social media users are potentially vulnerable. So are we potentially working with data produced by children or vulnerable adults? If you think that this might be the case, then this places a different responsibility on you as a researcher to seek informed consent from the users, if they're adults, or perhaps from parents or responsible adults in the case of children.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: Once you've dealt with this issue, you then finally need to consider whether the subject matter can be considered sensitive. So going back to whether or not you think that exposing this data or using this data might place the participants under potential risk of harm. And again, that's considering issues about whether you're working with data that looks at illegal activity, financial status, extramarital relationships.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: These are just a few examples of the kinds of subjects that might potentially be sensitive. And if you're working with sensitive data, then again this means that you're going to need to look at issues around whether you need to seek informed consent, and placing more importance on making sure that the data is kept anonymous. And in some very extreme cases, you might decide that in fact this subject matter and this data is far too sensitive to work with, and you might need to revert to more traditional data collection methods, such as working with questionnaires, focus groups, or in-depth interviews.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: So, in research today, we're increasingly expected to not only share the outputs and the findings of our research, but in many cases to share our data sets, such as, for example, research which is funded by the UK Research Councils, in which it's stipulated that we have to share our data sets online, unless we can make a good argument that the data is sensitive or so on.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: So the question really is, are you going to share your data set either with other researchers or with the general public or with people with your own organization? And if so, will social media users be anonymised sufficiently in those published outputs and shared data sets?

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: So the question that you really need to ask is whether or not you can publish or share this data set. And that goes back to issues around anonymity, informed consent, privacy, and the sensitivity of the data. [Case Studies] So now that I've introduced the framework, I thought it might be useful to present a number of case studies that might help you to work through the different scenarios you might find yourself in with social media data.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: Context. The researcher wishes to study support mechanisms between members of a discussion forum which deals with mental health issues such as depression and feelings of suicide. The forum is a closed forum which is password-protected, and registration must be approved by a gatekeeper, or a site admin. Concerns. The researcher is aware that this data is private.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: There's a high expectation of privacy on behalf of the users, who feel it is a safe space where they will only be conversing with other people in the same situation. This raises questions about the ethics of accessing the data, and how to report the findings of the data if it is accessed. Solution. The researcher needs to treat this data as private and sensitive.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: In order to access the data, the researcher should consider seeking consent from the gatekeeper of the community, or the site admin, who might seek the approval of the group more widely before deciding. Once consent has been granted, the researcher might wish to make themselves known to the community and give participants the right to opt out so that their data is not republished or analyzed.
DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: The gatekeeper might grant the researcher access to a certain area of the site, and retain a safe space to accommodate community members who are not comfortable with the researcher’s presence. If the researcher wishes to republish certain units of data in order to illustrate their findings, it is ethical to seek informed consent from each forum user whose data will be republished. Community members should be fully anonymised in any research outputs.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: Case study two. Context. A researcher wishes to study pro-legalization narratives on marijuana use. The data will be collected from Twitter, so it is open, public data. The researcher will gather data over the last seven days posted with the hashtags cannabis, legalize, and I smoke it. Concerns. Firstly, the subject matter is sensitive, because it refers to an activity that is still illegal in the UK. DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: Secondly, there may be users under the age of 18 contributing to the debate. Therefore, the researcher must work out how to handle the data in terms of protecting anonymity. Solution. The researcher decides that the data is public because it is posted on Twitter, a platform on which the default setting for posts is public. Most profiles are set to public, and can be viewed and followed by anyone.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: Furthermore, the use of hashtags implies that platform users are keen to contribute to a community or debate, and therefore expect an even greater number of people to see their data. The subject matter is sensitive, though, and there could be children contributing data, so there is considerable risk of harm. The researcher decides it is OK to access the data and present results from aggregate data, but it is not OK to publish data set, prohibited by Twitter anyhow, or republish direct quotes which will lead interested parties to the user’s profile, hence compromising anonymity.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: The researcher will therefore present paraphrased quotes, removing ID handles, to reflect the themes that emerge, and provide details on how interested parties might recreate the data search for themselves. Some direct quotes may be used with informed consent from the platform user, but the researcher knows he must take steps to ensure that the user is over the age of 18. Case study three.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: Context. A researcher wishes to study public interactions on a dating platform such as Tinder. Although the posts under scrutiny are public, rather than through private messaging, she needs to sign up to Tinder to view them. By signing up, she has to fill in a registration form, including questions such as I am a woman looking for a man, woman, et cetera. It is therefore reasonable to think that users of the platform expect that other people viewing that profile might be doing so for similar, ie dating, reasons.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: The researcher is also aware that there may be people under the age of 18 using the platform. The users of the platform are aware that there is a very large number of people using the platform and potentially able to access their profile. Concerns. Firstly, can the researcher ethically access and republish this data, given that the users of the platform have a reasonable expectation that people seeing their data are like-minded?

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: Secondly, is there a chance that vulnerable people, such as children, could be using the platform? Thirdly, is the data likely to be sensitive? Solution. The researcher decides that, although the platform users may expect others viewing their profile to be like-minded, they will be expecting strangers to view their profile, so the data is not private.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: There is, however, a chance that children could be using the platform, and the data is potentially sensitive, eg under-age children engaging in sexual talk or activity, or people looking to engage in extramarital relationships and so on. The researcher therefore can access and analyze the data, but needs to be careful with republishing. She does not publish the data set, and when writing up her results she only uses quotes that are paraphrased and she is sure cannot be used to identify the platform user.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: Consent to use data is problematic here, because the platform is popular with those under the age of 18, who may be dishonest about their age or use a misleading photograph. [Conclusion] So I hope that you found the video useful and the framework useful in helping you to work through your social media data.
DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: Conversations on standards in social media ethics have to be ongoing, because technology always changes and social media platforms are continuously changing, as are the terms and conditions around those platforms. So we would hope that new ethical frameworks would emerge and refine with time as technology changes, and technology use changes.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: The framework itself should be considered as guidance. And it's not prescriptive, because each social media context is unique. The ultimate responsibility lies with the researcher themselves, along with their ethics committee to ensure that the approach that is being taken is ethical. But I do hope that the framework has provided some guidance with that, and hopefully raised awareness of the ethical issues that do surround the use of social media data in research.

DR. LEANNE TOWNSEND [continued]: [MUSIC PLAYING]