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A new, digital age characterized by a dramatic increase in the use of communication technology has introduced not only unprecedented research opportunities for modern scientists but also novel ethical concerns and challenges. Facing previously unknown ethical issues, often concerning new modes of data collection in the digital realm, academic researchers and institutions continue debating how best to maintain the high ethical standards required for scientific practices. In this short paper, I examine a study on online networking behaviors, namely "Tastes, ties, and time: A new social network dataset using Facebook.com" (2008) by Kevin Lewis and coauthors, to understand the ethical implications of modern research. In doing so, I refer to Matthew Salganik's (2017) four principles of ethical research: Respect for Persons, Beneficence, Justice, and Respect for Law and Public Interest. In the following paragraphs, I offer a summary of Lewis et al. (2008) and brief discussion on the four principles. Then, I offer an evaluation of Lewis et al. (2008) apropos of the four principles.

"Tastes, ties, and time" (2008) is one of the initial attempts made to take advantage of the growing body of data generated by popular use of social media, or "social network sites." Acknowledging the unique opportunities offered by this, the authors present a set of social network data extracted from Facebook, which they claim to be "the first dataset of its kind," as well as of their analysis of the dataset. More specifically, the dataset consists of the profile and network data of a group college students, "the freshmen class of 2009 in a private college in the Northeast U.S." The data was collected by downloading from the Facebook website. The authors justified the lack of informed consent in their data collection process by using anonymization, converting students' names to numeric identifiers as well as "removing or encoding all other information that could be traced back to individual students."

Shortly after its publication, the study received mixed responses. Perhaps the most critical element of the responses concerns the insufficient measure taken by Lewis et al. to protect the identity and privacy of their subjects; the source of their data, as Michael Zimmer points out in “‘But the data is already public’: on the ethics of research in Facebook” (2010), was “quickly identified, placing the privacy of the students at risk.” In an interview with The Chronicles of Higher Education, Zimmer added that the “steps” the authors took in their research, “fell short” (Parry 2011). How is that so? The use of Salganik’s principles of ethical research to analyze “Tastes, ties, and time” can offer an illuminating step toward understanding the alleged pitfalls of the study, as well as new ethical demands for modern scientific research in the age of big data.

After reviewing how ethical standards for scientific research have developed as well as the changed climate for today’s research thanks to novel, digital sources of data, Salganik suggests four ethical principles for all scientific researchers to follow: Respect for Persons, Beneficence, Justice, and Respect for Law and Public Interest. The first, Respect for Persons, refers to the treatment of research subjects as autonomous individuals. Getting an informed consent from participants is the practical application of this principle. When working with people with diminished autonomy—for example, legal minors, prisoners, or those with disabilities—scientists must take extra measures to ensure their voluntary participation in research. The second principle, Beneficence, demands researchers not to harm anyone; if unavoidable, inflicted harms must be kept minimal. In practice, researchers must conduct the risk/benefit analysis of their projects and conduct research only if the risks and benefits are balanced in ethically agreeable ways.

The third principle of Justice recognizes that the risks and benefits of research are not always distributed fairly. Therefore, researchers must actively avoid a research design in which one population bears the burden disproportionately while another exclusively enjoys the advantages. One way to ensure such justice involves financial compensation for those who face the potentially negative results from their participation. Lastly, Respect for Law and Public Interest obliges researchers to take a wider view. According to this principle, researchers are expected to, first, comply with existing rules and regulations and, second, take responsibility for their actions.

Based on these principles, is “Tastes, ties, and time” research ethically unsound? Clearly, Lewis et al. made little effort to gain informed consent for the students, reducing them to mere objects whose online behaviors are to be examined. Anonymizing the students’ names and other potential identifiers falls short here because the authors failed to present the students with a chance to give their consent regarding their participation in the study. In other words, the students’ autonomy was not respected, and the first principle of Respect for Persons is violated. In addition, despite the authors’ attempt to prevent harm to their research subjects, the identity of the students, members of the Harvard University class of 2009, were exposed and individuals were left identifiable through the data. Considering the largely unfiltered uses of social media in everyday life, implications of the identifiability of the students include the infringement of their privacy and damage to their reputations. The principle of Beneficence is not upheld.

The “Tastes, ties, and time” study had an opportunity to mitigate *ex post facto* the risks of the students by offering compensations to the students, who bore the disproportionate burden of risk in the research. However, unaware of the true implications of their innovative project, the researchers did not seek to balance the potential harm to the students and, thereby, failed to stand by the third principle of Justice. Nonetheless, there is no evidence that Lewis et al. broke any explicit rules and regulations regarding the use of students’ information. This can be partly explained by the fact that “Tastes, ties, and time” was among the first of its kind and the regulating bodies, such as the Institutional Review Board, did not have well developed standards for research using data extracted from people’s use of social media. In addition, the authors’ ambition to shed light on a newly emerging social phenomenon is a justifiably noble one, which could further the understanding of our social reality. Accordingly, the study can be evaluated to be in line with the fourth principle of Respect for Law and Public Interest.

To conclude, the research by Lewis et al. on social media do not meet the requirements of Salganik’s four ethical principles. Rather than criticizing the authors for their pitfalls, however, we must learn from the mistakes that they committed at the time when researchers were not familiar with the new challenges of conducting research regarding the realm of social media. Indeed, it is always difficult to consider the rights of those with whom we do not interact in person. Despite of, or perhaps because of, such difficulty, modern researchers must make conscious efforts to maintain higher ethical standards, for science belongs to not a small elite group of researchers but the humanity as a whole. (Word Count: 1163)

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