Are you really one of us? : Exploring Ethics, Risk and Insider Research in a Private Facebook Community

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ABSTRACT

Researchers have only just begun grappling with the ethical implications of social media research, since more research is conducted online in virtual communities. Ethical review boards may not have the understanding or training to advise on projects with elements of social media research. This paper is a reflexive account that explores the author's decision to undertake research in a private Facebook community, of which she was already a member. This paper details the negative response that was received from community gatekeepers, and explores the research decisions which elicited this response. This paper uses Lee-Treweek & Linkogle's four-part framework for understanding researcher risk, and presents in this instance that the risk of social isolation faced by the researcher was too significant to proceed with the study. Insider research, and netnography are two complicated areas of research. This paper contributes to ongoing learning in this growing field.

CCS CONCEPTS

• Social and professional topics~Codes of ethics • Networks~Social media networks

KEYWORDS

Online community, netnography, ethics, researcher risk

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1 INTRODUCTION

"How do we even know who you are? Maybe you are the media, trying to get another article about catty military wives? I feel betrayed." Accusations came flying across the screen less than half an hour after sending a request to conduct research in a closed Facebook group. The aim of the research was to capture the social media interactions of the partners of those currently serving in the Australian Defence Force (ADF). At the time of study's design, the concept appeared simple. If the focus of the study was to discover how ADF partners use social media to meet their support and information needs, why not examine the interactions directly, by conducting a content analysis of posts in a Facebook group populated by ADF partners? As an insider in the community, there was no issue of access, and certainly, research on social media platforms is not a completely new phenomenon. Researchers are drawn to social media methods for the advantages these methods offer in investigating naturally occurring behaviour, particularly in difficult to reach communities [1].

Moving into the data collection phase of the research, it was immediately apparent that it would not be so simple, and the established ethical debates around social media methods become increasingly complicated when additional layers of insider research and closed communities were added. This paper offers a reflexive account of the researcher's experiences and decision-making process while undertaking her Ph.D. study of the social media interactions of ADF partners. Reflexive accounts are important for continuing discussions about the risk researcher's face while undertaking fieldwork across all forms. This is especially important as researchers from a variety of fields engage more with participants in new places, such as the online space [2]. This paper offers a unique perspective in that many discussions around social media research and ethics focuses on the risk to the participants, rather than offering perspectives on risk faced by the researcher.

2 BACKGROUND

Undertaking qualitative research on social media places researchers into a new, relatively unexplored methodological field. The study of online interaction and behavior is still emerging. The concepts and norms accepted in other methods of research have yet to be established in this field, yet the consequences —to both participants and researchers— are unique and significant [3]. Ethical review committees can be inadequately prepared for applications that include a social media research component [3, 1, 4]. In the absence of advice and monitoring from ethical committees, the emphasis is instead placed on the researcher to identify areas of potential risk and adequately plan to overcome these. In a systematic review of 17 studies that used social media as a data source, Golder et al. [5] found researchers worried that risks were not 'taken seriously' by International Review Boards. While ethical standards often change, the change is even more marked and rapid in the field of online research. For instance, while groups have been a feature on Facebook since its inception, the way people join and interact in these groups has rapidly changed [6]. The examination of ethical issues in regards to online research is especially prevalent, as more researchers engage with participants online [2].

The willingness of others in this field to share their experiences, both their successes and challenges, researchers have already begun to generate best practice with regards to prevalent issues, such as participant recruitment methods [9]. In spite of this, published material infrequently reflects on the process researchers undertook when making ethical decisions while forming their research plan [3]. It is important that work is published on these decisions and continue to pave the way for upcoming research in this area. This is especially prevalent with the added component of insider research. Greene [10] defines insider research as "that which is conducted within a social group, organization or culture of which the researcher is also a member." Indeed, the number of insider research projects are increasing [10, 11] and increased understanding of the experience of insider research, especially in online environments, is needed. Reflexive accounts are a suitable way of exploring not only the impact of insider status, but also increasing the robustness of the research. Reflexive accounts which monitor the impact of insider status on the researcher offer the additional benefit of improving objectivity [12].

The intent of the aforementioned research project was to monitor posts in a Facebook community populated by ADF partners. This was planned as a content analysis, which would collect and analyze posts made in the group over a short period of time, seeking examples of how partners used groups on the popular social networking platform for social support and information. Despite the stated importance of families to the ongoing activities of the ADF, research into the needs of families is limited. Quantitative surveys of the ADF community indicated that partners may be rejecting official support networks, such as the Defence Community Organisation, favoring peer support networks on social media instead [13]. In domestic and international studies, military family well-being has been linked with increased mission readiness, ongoing member retention, and even decreased symptoms of post-traumatic stress syndrome following deployment [13, 14].

In the study of military partners' online interactions, the research of High et al. [15] is one of few published works that address the online interactions of military communities. Their research analyzed 1,233 posts from an internet discussion board dedicated to US Marine families. High et al. [15] notes that permission was sought from the website administrator prior to proceeding with the collection of data from the internet discussion board, but does not mention what access was required by researchers. This research used data collected by fellow online researcher Jennings-Kelsall et al. [16], who also neglected to mention how access to the information was sought, and what considerations might have been made surrounding the ethical decision to engage in research online. Indeed, Henderson, Johnson and Auld [3] found, in an analysis of thirty published works on one aspect of social media research, few provided details of ethical considerations taken. By specifically outlining the ethical challenges encountered in online research, this reflexive account contributes to filling the gap in literature.

3 DISCUSSION

3.1 But is the Group Public or Private? Who Decides?

One of the most significant ethical challenges being debated by internet researchers is the decision to consider the research space as open or closed- that is, whether to consider the data public or private [5]. As with ethnographic studies, a strong argument can be made that data collected in a public space does not require individual consent from each participant in the study. To date, published research in online communities has frequently taken place in publicly accessible platforms such as Twitter and Reddit, where the content is open and available, even to those without a user account. By contrast, when a researcher needs to create a user account to gain access to an online community, the decision to declare the data as public or private is less obvious. While some researchers argue that the internet is rarely a private space, others identify that there are many factors which must be taken into consideration, including the community's expectation of privacy [2].

This debate is ongoing [17] and complicated, as Henderson, Johnson and Auld [3] state: "In the context of social media, it becomes increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to ethically claim a dichotomy of private and public." Therefore, one of the most important decisions was to consider the private or public status of the community being researched. This decision was approached in the

context of deciding whether or not consent was required from participants, rather than an attempt to evaluate the groups' willingness to be approached, or gauging their potential reaction to a researcher in the space. As is common in content analysis methods, the review of publicly available text often does not required consent to be obtained. The researcher, perhaps naively, assumed the online community would be as warmly accepting and open as others had been until that point. The insider status of the researcher may have played a role in giving a false sense of confidence about the groups' likely reaction to a request for research.

The community under study in this account, ADF partners interacting in a Facebook group, has a number of unique features that led to the decision to define the group, and thus the research space, as private for the purpose of consent collection. There is a gap in literature where researchers do not offer detailed justifications for their decisions in considering the research space public or private. This paper fills this gap by specifically examining decisions made.

'Groups' are a feature on the popular social networking platform. Groups facilitate discussions between users, based on their commonalities [18]. Firstly, people seeking access to the group need to be added or invited by an existing member. At the time of research, the group under study was 'Secret'. Facebook groups that are labelled as secret do not appear in search engine results, and only current members can see the group's membership list. This means that incoming members need to have been made aware of the group through their networks. New members are vetted by group administrators, to confirm their association with the ADF. This intensive validation process aims to ensure that outsiders are not included, leaving the group with a clear peer-support focus. This community is one of many similar Facebook groups that offer links to information and support for ADF partners.

In addition, from the researcher's personal participation in the group, it was clear that the group has an expectation of privacy. While group members appeared to be realistic and appreciate that true privacy within internet groups is rare, access to the group by 'outsiders', or people using the group for their own gain-for example, businesses selling items- was discouraged, or outright disallowed through restriction of membership and deletion of posts. Despite frequent reminders from group administrators about the non-private status of social media platforms, people responded negatively to instances of perceived privacy violations. Indeed, members had past experiences where content from the group had been shared externally, which will be explored in more detail later in this paper. The openly negative responses to these instances is a clear indication that members of the group perceived it to be a private space. Kantanen and Manninen [19] demonstrate that these expectations are present in social media communities, saying "Even on public forums, people may have expectations of privacy, or find it inappropriate that their inputs are read, collected or analyzed by external parties." Steinmetz [2] proposes that the feelings of the participants about privacy are essential in considering whether or not their space is private or public; Roberts [17] agrees, listing participant perception as one important component in the process of defining the privacy of a research space. "When making an initial assessment of whether an online community is public or private, consideration needs to be given to the accessibility of the community to the general public, the perceptions of members, community statements, topic and setting sensitivity, permanence of records and intended audience," argues Roberts [17]. It was the difficulty in gaining access to, or even awareness of, the group, as well as the group's clear intention of privacy that led the researcher to consider that the group operates in the private, not public space.

The decision to consider the space as private led to the conclusion that informed consent would need to be collected from group members. In spite of making the decision that the group's privacy status deemed informed consent necessary, the researcher did not anticipate a negative response to her request to conduct research within the group. While the group had a history of negative responses to perceived privacy violations, this was not in the context of research. Having received frequent support from potential participants about the importance and value of the research topic related to ADF partners, the researcher assumed the online community would be as accepting as it had been to others thus far.

The researcher approached administrators of the group, who act as community gatekeepers. There appears to be no consensus on whether or not researchers should approach administrators prior to commencing research in an online space [5]. Social media community research academic Christine Hine [34], in one of many experiences researching in social media groups, explored her decision to approach community moderators for permission prior to contacting group members. Similarly, in the instance of ADF partners, Hine aimed to gather the endorsement of group administrators to confirm the legitimacy of the research project to group members. The researcher was also considerate of the cautious control the administrators exercised in the group, and while the researcher appreciated the administrators concerns around privacy and external use of group content, did not perceive the administrators would be resistant to the researcher approaching group members for their consent. Informed consent be collected from each member of the group whose content (posts) would be included in the research.

Due to the sheer data load, and considerations about how and from whom to collect consent, the collection of informed consent from participants in a social media study can be

overwhelming and incredibly time-consuming [5]. This may be a factor contributing to the decision of researchers to declare a space public and therefore not collect consent from participants. Hudson and Bruckman [20] highlighted this in their study of internet discussion boards, saying that a "waiver of consent is appropriate in most cases, as obtaining consent is impractical." Kozinets [7] feels strongly about this issue and states that a project cannot claim to use methods of netnography if informed consent has not been obtained from participants. He considers that the autonomy of the group must be respected in the first instance, and actively discourages identity deception. Identity deception is where researchers pose as community members to gain access to the space and elicit responses, as was the case in Brotsky and Giles' [8] project with pro-ana online communities.

Consent in this study was intended to be collected electronically, with the researcher sending the participant an individual private message on Facebook about the research and asking for their permission to use their comments from the group, then directing the participant to an online version of the research information sheet where the participant could be given more details about the research and their involvement.

3.2 Miscommunication and Feelings of Betrayal

Following the receipt of successful low-risk ethical approvals, the researcher sent the group administrators a private message on the social media platform as planned. This message outlined the research purpose, the intent to collect posts from the group following obtaining consent from members, and then asked for the support of the administrators for these activities.

The response to this message was very negative. The group administrators were protective of the community, and the privacy of the people within it. The group administrators used words such as 'betrayed' to indicate their feelings, not just about the research project, but the researcher herself. They went on to question the researcher's status as a member of the ADF partner community, suggesting the researcher may have gained access to the group under false pretenses, and accused the researcher of possibly being a member of the media. The group administrators' responses were not anticipated by the researcher, despite the experiences of other online researchers, particularly in consideration of links between privacy, autonomy, and concepts of territory. Kozinets [7] examines issues of territory in his analysis netnography research methods. Claims over territory have always been important to groups in society, and these territorial actions are no less important to those groups that meet in a virtual space, he argues. It is important to consider the autonomy these online communities hold, and desire to maintain. As demonstrated by the reaction of the ADF administrators, perceived breaches of territory elicited territorial responses. Though with retrospective analysis the response from administrators could have been expected, this paper will clarify why, as an insider, the researcher did not consider the possibility of response to request being so negatively opposed. This includes the impact of the researchers' inexperience with social media research, and the methodological choice of a content analysis, rather than digital ethnography.

The researcher felt a strong impact from this negative response, not just professionally, but on a personal level, having had her identify as a military partner questioned. The group administrators asked for some time to consider the researcher's requests, and the researcher agreed that time would be the best option for de-escalating the situation. After re-examining the initial message and exploring further literature on digital ethnography, the researcher could see how she had ineffectively connected with the administrators.

Kozinets [7] demonstrates the importance of language in communicating with participants, providing an example of how online researchers can neglect to adjust their speech and tone to the group that they are talking with. This example closely aligns with the experience of the researcher in this case study. Kozinets was conducting research within an online discussion board, investigating online boycotting. Similar to the message that the researcher sent to the Facebook group administrators, Kozinets presented an introductory message that affirmed his researcher status and expertise. An influential discussion board member protested his presence in the group and petitioned for other community members to also exclude him. Kozinets [7] advises that the language of the message accounts heavily for the reaction of the community; by advertising his academic credentials and using advanced vocabulary he found that: "these rhetorical moves could be interpreted negatively, as signals of presumed superiority and outsider status." Negative responses from community gatekeepers are not uncommon in social media research [17]. "When the group is highly sensitive about its membership, and when it is formed for the purpose of a specific goal, the members may resent or even reject the (researcher) and his/her dual commitment" offers Adler, P and Adler [21].

In addition, the researcher had not accounted for the group's negative history in regards to content misuse. As previously highlighted, group members had either personally experienced or heard of experiences where content had been removed from ADF partner Facebook groups, with negative consequences. This ranged from group posts being shared with military unit command teams and subsequent disciplinary action for the member to screenshots resulting in online bullying and even media attention. An article in the *Northern Territory News* in 2013 highlighted behaviors of some ADF partners in Facebook groups and caused the closure of the particular group identified in the article [22]. This history meant that there was the increased possibility for members to associate this request for research

with other incidents in the past, where information was removed from the group and damaged personal and professional relationships. In not considering the group history applicable to her request for research, the researcher started the conversation at a disadvantage. Kozinets [7], in the context of the earlier example, also acknowledged his oversight in failing to account for the history the community under study had with outsiders and research.

Kozinets [7] experience of naivety, which aligns with the researchers, is not uncommon. Annette Markham [35] recalled the experience of commencing research online. She states "We were naïve enough to think that it would be relatively straight-forward to transfer research strategies developed for studying face-to-face context online." Likewise, Hine discusses the difficulty, even for experienced researchers in "adapting the already complex and tricky process of conducting ethnography" with computer-mediated communication" [34]. Markham [35] believes that continual discussion of the explicit challenges, issues and solutions in reflexive accounts such as this one, are essential for moving forward.

The original message sent by the researcher to group administrators also neglected to clearly identify the researcher's identity as a military partner. In highlighting the researcher status, the researcher minimized rather than utilized her insider status [11]. This demonstrated to the group administrators that she was indeed an outsider, made that way by her connection to a more privileged status, that of university researcher [23]. This was especially unhelpful considering the researcher had considered her insider status as key to gaining permission to conduct research. In a later message to the group administrators, the researcher clarified her background, family situation and the work her partner did in the military prior to discussing her research. This message was very well received, leading to the eventual repairing of the relationship. Though the social media analysis did not eventuate, the group administrators became supporters of the wider research project, which also included qualitative interviewing. This further confirmed it was the researcher's insider status which engaged participants.

3.3 Researcher Risk: Social Isolation

The negative reaction from the community administrators caused the researcher to closely reassess the decision to undertake research in the group. When the negative responses were received from the group administrators, one immediate cause for concern for the researcher was that she would be removed from the group. This would mean removal from a community that is a personal resource, both socially and informationally. This fear is not unfounded. Hudson and Bruckman [20] were removed from 63.3% of the internet chatrooms they attempted to conduct research in when their status as researchers was revealed. This action would also have a sustained impact on personal reputation. Likewise, this was a consideration for Hine [34], who understood that a negative reaction from group members could be damaging to her future research prospects, and professional reputation. The ADF partner network is a small, closed community. The partners in these online groups are also active throughout the wider community, and accordingly the researcher risked isolation not just from online but also offline networks. The online space is no longer separate to the offline one [24]. The two worlds frequently shift and move between, and a person can feel equally invested in a virtual community, with the associated risks, as a traditional, geographically based one [25]. Particularly, online communities are places where the distinction between roles of researcher and participant, insider and outsider distort [26].

Researcher risk is a topic not frequently discussed in relation to social media research. It may be easy to dismiss social media research as not dangerous, especially compared to the physical danger some researchers face when undertaking fieldwork. It would seem that, comparing a researcher interacting with participants via a computer screen seems inherently less risky than a researcher conducting face-to-face fieldwork. Until recently, risk to the researcher was a concept limited to physical danger. Lee-Treweek and Linkogle [27] developed a four area framework for understanding risk to the researcher. Their framework argues that researcher risk includes four components; physical, emotional, ethical and professional. These aspects of researcher risk have been demonstrated by others in the field. One example of this is the work of Letherby [28], who wrote a comprehensive exploration of emotional work that can be faced by researchers. Her work, which was in relation to insider researchers interviewing women on involuntary childlessness, reflects on the difficulty faced by those engaged in research on emotionally charged topics.

The researchers' work within the ADF partner community was, by previous definitions, safe. While the researcher met with participants face-to-face to undertake semi-structured interviews and focus groups, precautions were taken to assure the researcher's physical safety. The classification of this research as low risk led to the decision to apply for a low-risk ethics application, which was approved by two relevant ethical boards. The experience of the researcher engaging in online research provides an apt demonstration of how research projects that are initially considered to be low risk can still present a risk to the researcher. In this instance, the researcher faced professional risk, and additionally a type of emotional risk, social isolation.

In addition, the topic of the research was not considered sensitive or risky. Where researchers who engage in research on controversial or sensitive topics may prepare themselves for resistance, when the topic is not flagged as sensitive, there is no preparation for a negative reaction. A report

establishing the best practice norms for researchers engaged in "risky research" provides advice to universities and researchers on how to respond to online harassment [36]. This report opens by stating that these recommendations are "practices for researchers engaged in risky research." The examples given in this report focus on more traditional understandings of risky projects and sensitive topics. The experience of the researcher in this reflexive account suggests that concepts of risk can be more nuanced and complex than they first appear.

The human need for community and the benefits of strong community connection have been well established. While studies on ADF partners are limited, existing research on military partners in both Australia and overseas demonstrates a clear link between connections with a strong community or support network, and the partner's wellbeing [29-32]. Additionally, recent surveys of the ADF family community indicate that community is being built online, both complimenting and replacing offline community links [13]. From the commencement of the research, the researcher had already begun to withdraw from the group. This trend towards withdrawal has been noted by other insider researchers, who found that researchers who are insiders tend to withdraw from the group in order assert their new researcher status, while outsiders tend to immerse into the group and distance themselves from their identity as a researcher [21]. The researcher noted that in the days following the decision to not pursue the social media analysis, the researcher began commenting on posts in the group again for the first time in months, responding to one group survey about military orders, and a second response providing local resource suggestions. Following these posts, the researcher noted in a fieldwork diary how the decision to not proceed with the social media analysis may be linked to her personal re-engagement in the community.

While researcher risk, specifically social isolation, was the primary reason for the withdrawal from the social media analysis following the negative reaction of group administrators, other factors contributed. These factors include the impact on the community and the protection of participant identity. The presence of a researcher knowingly collecting data from the group would have had an impact on the group, in part due to the group's negative association with outsiders and content removal, as was detailed above. The potential risk to participants was also carefully considered. The researchers considered the possibility of participants being identified, social media research carries with it an increased responsibility to protect the identities of participants due to the unique dynamic of social media sites [4]. In addition, it is worthwhile to consider the researcher's presence in the community could also betray the anonymity of the group, as Facebook allows for friends and others to search for groups that a person is a part of [33]. Consideration was also given to the researcher's desire not to alienate community gatekeepers in order to do future research in the community.

Ultimately, the decision was made not to engage in research directly within the group. The researcher's involvement in the group undoubtedly informed the wider research project, in assisting with the formation of research questions, the generation of interview questions, and later identifying themes from the data. Cote [33] also reflected on the indirect impact of social media on her research, stating that "data collected while conducting interviews are suddenly contextualized or challenged by reading a participant's latest Facebook posts."

3.4 Consequences of Methodology

In reflexively evaluating the decisions and outcomes associated with the social media analysis, the researcher became aware of the influence of the chosen methodology. The researcher approached the social media analysis as a content analysis, rather than a digital ethnography. In hindsight, a digital ethnography approach would have beena more appropriate methodological choice for framing the collection of data from the social media group.

The research was influenced by this as literature related to online content analysis generates different discussions and holds different norms than digital ethnography. This difference is evident firstly in the way that online content analysis tends to consider the data text, rather than human interaction. If the researcher had identified the methodology as a digital ethnography, the ethical review board may have applied their understanding of traditional ethnography, which alludes to challenges being present. A digital ethnography methodology may have prompted a search into ethnography, as opposed to online content analysis, which may have have led the researcher to literature by Rheingold, Hine and Pink [38, 34, 37]. Hine's 2015 experience in researching "Freecycle" social media communities would have been particularly helpful to the researcher.

This is an important finding, as more researchers from a wider variety of fields are attracted by the richness of the data on offer and engage in social media research.

4 CONCLUSIONS

In summary, the decision to remove the social media analysis from the research methodology did not have a negative impact on the outcomes of the research; the supporting methods of qualitative interviewing proved to be sufficient in providing robust findings. While challenging at the time, this experience has provided the researcher with rich insight to issues impacting social media, trust and online community.

This paper has provided a background into netnography and social media research methods. The paper also highlights that researchers neglecting to publish their

experiences with planning and ethical components of social media research as a gap in the literature. This paper also contributes to discussions on what constitutes public and private spaces online by providing an example of a space where members demand privacy and are exclusive towards outsiders. These attitudes indicate to researchers that they should also consider those spaces private, and carry out their research accordingly. This paper is also unique, as unlike more prevalent research projects of open social media platforms such as Twitter or Reddit, the online space being research could not arguably be considered public, which complicated issues of consent and access.

This paper also discusses researcher risk, using Lee-Treweek and Linkogle [27]'s four-part framework for understanding risks beyond the immediate physical. Ethical committees and researchers alike are perhaps ill-equipped for assessing the risks faced by online researchers as they engage people on modern communication platforms.

In providing a reflexive account, this paper has detailed the experience of one researcher who attempted to collect informed consent from the community under study. Aligning with Kozinets [7] theories on online territorial behavior, the community gatekeepers (Facebook group administrators) responded by, demonstrating their feelings of protectiveness towards the online space where members operated. The administrators questioned the right of the researcher to be engaged in the space, primarily as a researcher, but then secondarily as a person, doubting her status as a military partner. The researcher's following reflection on the experience demonstrates that researchers need to be considerate of their tone and language when engaging with potential participants on social media platforms. This is of particular importance for insider researchers, who have the unique challenge of balancing their dual identities.

More research is needed regarding supporting social media researchers, especially those engaged in insider research. This paper aims to contribute to this important discussion by sharing one example of a situation in which social media research presented a unique challenge, and perceived risk to the researcher.

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