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Article

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Abstract

Research into youth engagement with social network sites such as MySpace and Facebook highlights a complex set of ethical dimensions, which do not always translate easily from similar concerns in traditional offline research. On social network sites, it is clear that many young people are managing their online presences in strategic ways, often involving conventions around determining access to these spaces. If these sites are framed by their young users as at least 'partially private', how should the researcher seek access to these spaces and how should the researcher operate in these spaces if access is permitted? This article reflects on qualitative research undertaken by the author from 2007 to 2010, which involved 'friending' participants on MySpace and Facebook. Based on this reflection, and contextualized by an engagement with literature concerning both Internet research and youth research, this article argues that social network sites blur the public/private dichotomy. Thus, research engaging with participants on these sites requires ongoing ethical reflection around assumptions about public and private information, and researchers, institutional ethics committees and review boards must develop and make use of suitably informed expertise to both conduct and review future scholarship in this area.

Keywords

ethics, identity, privacy, social network sites, youth research

The rapid and broad adoption of social network sites such as MySpace and Facebook has garnered considerable attention from researchers of youth and new media. Research concerning social network sites contributes to a broader and still-developing 'discipline' or 'field' of Internet research (Baym, 2005), pioneered by research including Rheingold's (1994) work on virtual communities, Turkle's (1995) work on identity online and Baym's (1995, 2000) investigations of online fan communities (see Gurka, 2004 and Wellman, 2010, for effective reviews of early Internet studies research). While the rise in popularity of social network sites such as MySpace and Facebook has been particularly pronounced since 2007 (Livingstone, 2008), earlier

social network sites, such as Friendster, have been attracting the attention of youth studies scholars since 2003 (boyd, 2007b: 132). From the earliest forms of Internet research on Usenet and Multi-User Dungeons or Domains (MUDs) through to current research on new and still emerging forms of social media, the ethical dimensions of this research have been highly contentious and often debated.

While social network sites are certainly not populated entirely by young people, much of the research that investigates these sites is centred on young users, especially students (boyd, 2006, 2007a, 2007b; Dobson, 2008; Joinson, 2008; Jones et al., 2008; Lewis et al., 2008; Notley, 2009; Robards and Bennett, 2011; Tufecki, 2008; West et al., 2009). In Livingstone's (2008: 394) words, 'young people are in the vanguard of social networking practices', and thus their practices receive the most scrutiny, consistent with a broader 'fixation' (Cieslik, 2003: 2) on young people in both scholarly work and in popular discourse. At the nexus of this interest in both young people and in emerging forms of sociality on the Internet lies a research terrain rife with ethical challenges, some of which are shared with traditional offline ethnographic research and others which present new hurdles for researchers. The central challenge addressed in this article is the blurring between 'public' and 'private' information and social interactions on the Internet, both for young people themselves as they develop strategies for 'being' on the Internet, and also for youth researchers who must develop ethically sound methods of studying the development of those strategies and conventions while also attending to the ethics of consent and beneficence.

As Wakeford (2004: 35) explains, 'webpages are simultaneously computer code, cultural representations and the outcome of skilled labour...[they are] complex artefacts that can be written, read, used or consumed'. Beyond this, it has also been argued that homepages (Cheung, 2004) and, to a greater extent, profiles on social network sites (Pearson, 2009; Robards, 2010) both 'represent the individual and serve as the locus of interaction' (boyd, 2011: 43). Thus, these 'webpages' can be understood as spaces in which identity is constructed and performed, where social interactions occur, are articulated, made visible, and subsequently archived by default: 'what one says sticks around' (boyd, 2011: 46). Should research that investigates what these profiles contain be governed by the ethics of archival research, then? Or, as dynamic spaces which are constantly revised, maintained and (re)produced by their creators (profile authors) and those connected to and permitted to contribute to the profile ('Friends'[1] writing on profile walls, commenting on images and status updates, posting links and so on), should research in these spaces be governed by the more stringent ethical guidelines of in-person ethnographic research involving in-depth interviews and participant observation? Or, do we need a new set of ethical guidelines? If this information, these interactions, cannot be governed by a public/private dichotomy, as I will argue, how does the researcher navigate issues of 'ownership' in these spaces? Furthermore, if access to these profiles can only be granted through a process of mutual 'friending' (boyd, 2006; Lewis and West, 2009) between participant and researcher (where profiles are set to private), how does this kind of research disturb the researcher–participant relationship? What kind of ethical challenges does disturbing this relationship raise? These questions are relevant not only for protecting the participant but also the researcher, whose own profile is made

visible to the participant in the friending process. Thus, the researcher's own potentially pre-existing, potentially 'private' online conduct is brought into the research scenario, challenging long-standing notions of 'professional' and subjective distance between researcher and participant, and requiring researchers who use social network sites in their research to rethink the formation of 'ethically responsible' research relationships.

In this article, I seek to contribute to a growing body of literature that begins to tackle some of these contentious and important issues which are particularly salient in discussions about the future of ethical research involving young people and social network sites. In achieving this goal, I divide this article into two main sections. First, I will consider a recent controversial research project which involved a student cohort of young Facebook users, conducted without the consent of the participants. In doing so, I will set out some of the existing frameworks that govern the ethical conduct of Internet research and the subsequent debates and tensions that emerge from this contested area of scholarship, especially around what constitutes 'public' and 'private' content on the Internet. In the second section, I will contextualize this argument through a reflective discussion drawing on my own experience of recent qualitative research into the emerging online social practices of young MySpace and Facebook users on Australia's Gold Coast. In addition to in-person, in-depth interviews, this study also involved observation of participants' profiles which required me to 'friend' my participants on their social network site(s) of choice in order to view their profiles. The friending process occurs when one user sends a friend request to another, which can be accepted, ignored or rejected. If the request is accepted, both parties are granted access to each other's profiles. Thus, the ethics of friending participants, discussed here as a technical process beyond establishing rapport with participants, is also a central concern of this article.

Youth Research Ethics

The Australian *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (National Health and Medical Research Council [NHMRC], 2007), which informs my own practice as a researcher in Australia and sets the guidelines for institutional approval of my research, identifies four key principles by which the ethical conduct of research can be assessed. First, the research must have *merit* and be conducted with *integrity*. This includes the justification for the project, the proven nature and appropriateness of research design, appropriate dissemination of results and reflection upon the presence of any conflicts of interest, including research sponsorship. The second principle is *justice*, concerned with the grounds upon which participants are included and excluded (recruitment), reflection upon the involvement of over-researched populations, the burden on participants versus the flow of benefits (for participants, for the 'community', for 'knowledge'), the fair treatment of participants, consideration of negative social justice impacts of the research and participant access to results. The final two principles are particularly salient for the argument being advanced in this article: *beneficence* and *respect for persons*. In relation to the third, *beneficence*, the

researcher must justify the risks and burdens of the research, seek to minimize any harm involved (even where 'harm' might not be anticipated) and ensure participants are recruited through a process of informed consent, while also considering the ongoing responsibility of researchers beyond the formal life cycle of the research. The fourth and final key principle is *respect for persons*: respecting the intrinsic value of people; respecting privacy; respecting the right to choose to participate; and respecting cultural beliefs and protocols. Involving this long list of considerations in the research process is, I would argue, central to the conduct of 'sound ethical research'.

These guidelines are not without their limitations. First, these guidelines are maintained by the NHMRC, meaning that the same set of guidelines that govern the collection and use of body organs, tissues and fluids also governs interviews and participant observation. There is a clear difference in the risks and implications for research conducted in medical/health research and research in the social sciences. However, the given guidelines are designed to provide a broad set of standards which can presumably be applied to any research involving human participants. Centrally, these guidelines are framed as encouraging the 'right spirit' of research, 'abiding respect and concern for one's fellow creatures' (NHMRC, 2007: 3), rather than obstructing or hindering research.

The second key issue relating to these guidelines, of particular importance for this article, is how the *National Statement* frames research involving young people. In the full document, young people are grouped into various 'levels of maturity': (*i*) infants; (*ii*) young children; (*iii*) young people of developing maturity; and (*iv*) young people mature enough to understand consent (NHMRC, 2007: 55). No age is attached to these groups, and the statement acknowledges that maturity levels will vary from person to person and that a young person may at once be at different levels of maturity for different research projects, depending on the context and complexity of the research. The statement also provides scope for young people of sufficient maturity (depending on the project) to provide their own consent to participate in research where there is only low risk to the participant (mitigated by anonymity) and where the research will benefit young people.

Attempting to group young people into categories of maturity is a subjective process, but in the context of these guidelines, these categories do provide the researcher and the institution responsible for approving research involving humans with a set of tools in the form of descriptions to enable critical reflection on maturity. Thus, while this *National Statement* is not without its limitations, it does provide a useful framework from which ethical reflection and consideration can occur. While I do not have the scope to explore all of these dimensions in this article in relation to research involving social network sites, I will touch on several, especially those concerned with privacy and consent.

Perhaps the most valuable point from the *National Statement* on ethical research is the first one, concerned with research integrity that involves open-ended reflection on research practices. Probyn and Lumby (2003: 10) argue that, in a 'use it or lose it' scenario, ongoing ethical reflection is central to good practice. Like servicing and maintaining a car, the ethical conduct of scholarship is an open-ended process. It does not end when a research project is designed, or when institutional clearance is given

or even when a project is finished; nor can ethical reflection end after the research is written up and eventually published or otherwise disseminated. Rather, the ethics of scholarship should be subject to ongoing scrutiny, reflection and revision.

Internet Research and Undoing the Private/ Public Dichotomy

It is clear that while many of the methods of offline ethnographic research—and the ethics that govern those methods—can be transferred in various ways to research involving social relations mediated by the Internet, there are limitations and necessary points of revision. Fernback (1999: 203), for instance, asks how sociological research might adapt to 'the bodiless province of cyberspace'. In relation to her work on 'cybercommunity', she goes on to note that the spatial metaphors developed around 'cyberspace' as 'the town hall, the public sphere, the virtual agora' (Fernback, 1999: 204) are part of an attempt to make new media familiar, and thus assist in the transference of methods and ethics to research that engages with these 'places' that are not places. However, these metaphors of place reduce a highly complex and dynamic system of sociality to conceptualizations that do not fit. There *are* bodies involved in online social interactions, but they are not always physically proximate. The cues of social interaction that allow individuals to 'go on in each other's presence' (Bauman, 1996: 19), then—when that presence is not physical and sometimes synchronous, sometimes asynchronous (boyd, 2008: 44)—must be expressed and mediated in different ways, as with social interactions mediated by a handwritten letter or a telephone. In short, research involving social interactions mediated online should recruit the methods and ethics researchers are familiar with, while also being sensitive to these points of distinction, and thus being open to revising research design, especially when concerning notions of public and private that Internet users are still coming to terms with.

According to Stern (2004), the nature of research involving the Internet makes it particularly problematic in ethical terms, because of the slippery nature of the public/private dichotomy. While she argues that researchers using the Internet to interact with participants should clearly be governed by the same ethical standards that govern offline, in-person research, for researchers using the Internet to study communications and social exchanges themselves while not necessarily engaging directly with another individual, the issue becomes less clear cut:

> One side of the controversy encompasses those who believe Internet communications that are publicly accessible are 'public' communications. On the other side are those who contend that simply because communications are publicly accessible does not mean that online authors consider their online discourse to be 'public' information, or that they recognise the extent to which their communications can be accessed by others. (Stern, 2004: 276)

Stern goes on to claim that young people (children and adolescents, in her terms) are potentially more at-risk here because they are less able to 'fully grasp the concept of

"public" in the same way we might expect adults to' (Stern, 2004: 277). In the decade since Stern's research on young people and personal homepages, the Internet has changed dramatically. While sharing some similarities, social network sites such as Facebook are also very different to the traditional homepages in Stern's study, especially in terms of the expectations and assumptions around privacy controls and thus what constitutes the 'private' versus the 'public' domain.

As I have discussed elsewhere, young people are increasingly developing highly strategic practices around managing their 'audiences' on social network sites (Robards, 2010). These emerging strategies, that require a nuanced understanding of the privacy mechanisms available to users, partly contradict Stern's earlier argument that young people may have more difficulty grasping the difference between public and private forms of sociality on the Internet. The closed structure of Facebook itself further blurs distinctions between public and private. For example, even 'public' ('everyone') profiles on Facebook now require a password to access in full.[2] While acquiring a Facebook account is trivial, and even with more than 845 million active users on the site (Facebook.com, 2012), this form of 'open profile' is not truly public. Then, there are the profiles that are accessible to an entire network (everyone who is associated with a particular university, city or country and so on) and those profiles open to 'friends of friends'. While these profiles are not 'private', as I will discuss later through Zimmer's (2010) work, they should not be understood as 'public' or 'open' for research purposes. Beyond these privacy settings, there are an array of customizable options which allow Facebook users to make certain parts of their profile visible to some users and not others, resulting in a spectrum of privacy practices as diverse as the individuals who use the site. Thus, Facebook's structure troubles the distinction between public and private even further than Stern's (2004) framing of this clearly problematic dichotomy. Researchers making use of sites like Facebook, then, must attend even more closely to the ethical dimensions of their research. As the following case makes clear, thinking through these issues requires a familiarity with these sites of mediation that many researchers and institutional ethics committees or review boards are still coming to terms with.

The Case of the 'T3' Project and the Use of In-network Research Assistants

In 2008, a North American research team released a large dataset on a cohort of 1,640 college students containing information taken or interpreted from their Facebook profiles, including 'gender, race/ethnicity...socioeconomic status...social relationships...[and other] demographic traits' (Lewis et al., 2008: 330), along with information on 'home state, nation of origin, political views, sexual interests, college major, relational data, and cultural interests' (Zimmer, 2010: 321). While the researchers on the 'tastes, ties and time' project (or 'T3' for short) did gain approval from both Facebook and the college in question (later revealed to be Harvard, despite attempts by the researchers to anonymize the data), they did not seek permission to collect the data from the students whose profiles they were accessing. Zimmer (2010) conducts a thorough critique of the ethical dimensions of the research, arguing that

'the way in which the data was released, and the viewpoints publicly expressed by the authors reveals considerable *conceptual gaps in the understanding of the privacy implications of research in social networking spaces*' (Zimmer, 2010: 323; emphasis added). He goes on to say that the privacy of the research subjects continues to be threatened, despite good faith efforts made by the T3 research team, as the dataset has already been distributed.

One of the central concerns raised by Zimmer in his critique, and a concern central to this article, is the use of 'in-network' research assistants (RAs), who were also members of the Harvard network on Facebook, to collect the data for the T3 project. According to Zimmer (2010: 318), the researchers concede that 'one RA might have different access to a student's profile than a different RA, and being "public" or "private" on Facebook is merely relative to that particular RAs level of access'. Zimmer goes on to explain that some students in the study may have granted members of their Harvard network access to profile information that would not be accessible to a more general Internet-using 'public'. This level of access does not necessarily require users to have 'friended' each other, although this process generally implies even greater access. Using these in-network RAs to collect data for the project gave Lewis et al. (2008) access to information that may not have been publically available: 'The RAs, employed for the project, being from the same network as the subject, would be able to view and download a subject's profile data that was otherwise restricted from outside view' (Zimmer, 2010: 318). Thus, content and interactions made visible for users within the Harvard network was distributed to a broader public by way of RAs within that network.

This method of research is ethically problematic. While Lewis et al. (2008) did attempt to anonymize the data and successfully sought institutional support from both Facebook and Harvard, they failed to seek consent from the young 'subjects' of the research itself. The involvement and complicity of Harvard's Institutional Review Board (IRB)—charged with ensuring research is conducted ethically and responsibly—also points towards what Zimmer (2010: 323) refers to as a 'conceptual gap' in the understanding of the privacy implications associated with research involving social network sites.

What Lewis et al. (2008) and the Harvard IRB understood to be public information failed to take into account the 'contextual' nature of that information, best described by Nissenbaum (2004, 2010) through her framework of contextual integrity: 'there are no arenas of life not governed by norms of information flow, no information or spheres of life for which "anything goes."...[Almost everything] happens in a context not only of place but of politics, convention, and cultural expectation' (Nissenbaum, 2004: 137). In other words, what may be freely available to one user (as a 'Friend', or a 'Friend of a Friend' or a member of a network) may not be available to another user or an individual without a Facebook account. As I will continue to discuss in the following section, social network sites blur the private/public dichotomy. Thus, traditional models of research require ongoing revision if they are to be applied to research involving social network sites such as Facebook in a manner the holds to the ethical principles of beneficence and respect for persons.

Friending Participants: Audiences and Context

'Friendship' on a social network site does not equate precisely to more traditional understandings of the term friendship. Rather, social network sites collapse various social relationships into the single category of Friend, including parents, colleagues, casual acquaintances, lovers, friends of friends and so on. 'Networked publics,' according to boyd (2011: 50), 'force everyday people to contend with environments in which contexts are regularly colliding'. Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework relies on a separation of audiences to ensure an appropriate social performance from context to context. Social network sites, especially Facebook, collapse these performative contexts and audiences, troubling Goffman's framework for the presentation of self. Thus, new audience segregation and impression management strategies must be developed, an area of research that is ongoing (Ellison et al., 2011; Robards, 2010). Hogan (2010: 380) introduces a third party into this process of mediation, suggesting that Facebook (or its servers) 'knows who is considered an appropriate audience member for this content and who is not'.[3] It is precisely this failure to attend to the contextual nature of the information and social exchanges mediated on (and by) Facebook that caused Lewis et al. (2008) and the T3 project to inadequately address the ethical principles of beneficence and respect for persons.

For young users of these sites—who may wish to carve out a private space of their own online, away from authority and familial figures (boyd, 2007a; Stern, 2004: 280)—the collapse of the performative contexts just described can be problematic. In their study of 16 London-based undergraduates, for example, West et al. (2009) found some apprehension amongst their participants when asked if they would Friend a parent on Facebook: 'It...seems so awkward...I'd be like, "Look guys, I don't want to be rude, but I think it's an *invasion of my privacy* if you're looking at my Facebook profile, because it's to do with my friends"' (participant 'Sophie' in West et al., 2009: 620; emphasis added). It is my argument that these spaces are, for many users, at least partially private, evidenced by the strategic ways in which young people's online social networks are largely made up of people they already know (boyd, 2007a; Joinson, 2008; Jones et al., 2008; Madden, 2012; Robards, 2010). In other words, sites like MySpace and Facebook are not necessarily places for 'networking' in the traditional sense of the word, where the performance of self may be framed in more 'public' terms, but instead they are often regarded by users as places where existing networks are articulated, strengthened and made visible (boyd and Ellison, 2007).

How, then, did the presence of a researcher—such as myself—affect the space? Were participants open to friending me on Facebook? What are the ethical challenges involved in friending research participants? In the following section, through a reflection on my own research, I will provide some preliminary answers to these questions.

Young Australians and Social Network Sites

For the remainder of this article, I will draw on a two-part qualitative research project on young users of social network sites MySpace and Facebook in Australia. The project sought to understand how young people in Australia were using social

network sites, with a particular focus on the performance of reflexively constructed identities. The first part of the study was conducted in 2007 with 10 MySpace users aged 18–24 years. The second part of the study was conducted over 2009 and 2010, with 30 additional participants[4] aged 15–27 years who used a mixture of MySpace and Facebook as the latter had become the dominant social network site since the initial MySpace-focused component of the study. In both parts, data were collected by two methods, with the exception of the six participants aged 15–17 years, as I will discuss further later. The first method of data collection was an observation of participants' profiles, noting profile construction and content (display pictures, autobiographical 'about me' writing, lists of hobbies and interests), articulations of social capital (Friends lists, 'top friends', quantity of Friends) and other semiotic events (status updates, blog/note entries, shared content such as links and videos). These observations informed in-person interviews, such that participants were able to both describe their own practices and also (through prompts from my prior observations) comment reflexively on elements of their profile they may have otherwise avoided or considered irrelevant. For example, many participants would easily engage in storytelling around initial adoption of a social network site or describe friending strategies (Robards, 2010), but were often not able to (or were hesitant to) recall specific images on their profile or affiliations such as groups or interests. Coupling the observation of profiles with in-depth interviews allowed my own readings of my participants' profiles to be verified, challenged, problematized and/or refined, while also introducing a greater potential for probing in the interviews themselves, avoiding some of the reliability effects of self-reporting.

While the process of applying to my institution's ethics committee[5] for clearance to conduct this research was time consuming (mainly because of the 15–17 year old participants), in retrospect, it was also a useful process and an important part of my development as a researcher. While these processes are often framed as obstructive and hindering 'bureaucratic hoops' (White, 2007: 556) that researchers must jump through, the space that this process gave me to reflect on my research design and the ethical implications of that design was critical in the fieldwork. Despite the great care taken in the planning of this research, there was one significant ethical challenge that emerged in the course of the research that I did not anticipate: the extent to which the spaces I was investigating could be understood as personal and private. It was not until the second stage of my fieldwork that literature began to emerge about the intimate nature of certain online social spaces, such as LiveJournal (Hodkinson and Lincoln, 2008) and social network sites (Pearson, 2009). As I entered into conversations with my participants, and as they described the strict practices of control they exerted over their profiles (especially on Facebook), it became clear that being granted access to these spaces was a privilege:

> I'm very *picky* with who I accept as a Friend. If I don't know them or if I haven't met them or if they're a friend of a friend who I've heard of but I haven't met, I don't accept them... that's because my personal information is quite detailed, and with all this stuff like stalking and identity theft you've gotta be *vigilant*. I think a lot of young people nowadays—correct me if I'm wrong—aren't vigilant enough when it comes to shit like that. They leave themselves wide open to all kinds of crap. (Jamie, 27 years)

While not all participants were as 'picky' about friending practices, all but two of the 40 participants agreed that MySpace and Facebook were places for friends, not for meeting new people. Even participants with large networks, such as Eric (20 years), described Facebook as 'documenting real life' rather than as a tool to be used to meet new people. Of the 525 Friends Eric had on Facebook, he reported that there were only five he had never met before and a further 25–50 he had only met once or twice. Catherine (20 years) had a similar approach to meeting new people on Facebook: 'I don't know, I just don't think I could be Friends with someone I haven't met face-to-face'. While Catherine did explain that she did not consider all of her Facebook Friends her 'real friends', she saw the two conceptualizations of friendship/Friendship to be quite close. Other participants made a much clearer distinction between a 'Facebook Friend' and a 'real' or 'offline' friend. Simon (15 years), for example, generally only friended people he knew offline and who he considered a friend, but his understanding of the friending process was not static. He would friend people to gain access to their profiles, then remove them later in what was described as a 'Friendship cull':

> Int.: How many friends do you have on MySpace?
>
> Simon: 650. But I don't know...I know more than 80%.
>
> Int.: And those other 20%... how would you describe them?
>
> Simon: Just bands I like and stuff. I don't have that many, but...also random people I have to go through and delete.
>
> Int.: Why did you add them in the first place?
>
> Simon: Just adding them to see if I knew them at all or if I forgot or whatever...

Thus, even Simon's relatively relaxed friending strategy (when compared to the more 'picky' approach of older participant Jamie, for example) still frames his profile as a reasonably closed, personal space. Clearly, this presents a challenging ethical dilemma for the researcher who seeks to enter these spaces. Unlike entering a physical personal space that can be 'tidied up' or easily modified for impression management, the profile of a social network site is a highly dynamic space with which potentially hundreds of the participants' Friends are engaged, both synchronously and asynchronously (boyd, 2008: 44). To return to an earlier thread in this article, scholarship has often attempted to make sense of these *places that are not places* by invoking metaphors of place that we are more familiar with (Fernback, 1999; Hodkinson and Lincoln, 2008; Pearson, 2009). As I discovered, however, these metaphorical conceptualizations fell short of effectively describing the partially private yet archival nature of the profiles on MySpace and Facebook I was engaging with.

A Change in the Research Design

After several interviews, preceded by the friending process, I decided to incorporate two changes into my research design: first, a brief discussion towards the beginning

of my interview schedule about my 'presence' in the participants' online social space; and second, I decided not to friend the 15–17 year old participants.

In response to the first change, none of my participants reported any concerns about friending me—some even actively sought me out and initiated the Friend request once I began the recruitment process—but I reminded them that as with their consent to participate in the interview, they could also withdraw their 'Friendship consent' at any time by 'de-friending me'. Most found this quite humorous, and generally this served as a useful ice-breaker, but I believe it was also an important step in coming to terms with this particular ethical scenario. In the year since the end of my fieldwork, nine of the 27 participants I had friended on Facebook had either de-friended me or left the social network site, deactivating their accounts. None of the participants I friended on MySpace de-friended me, although as I have discussed elsewhere (Robards, 2012), this may simply be due to a broader move away from MySpace towards Facebook and thus a disinvestment in MySpace or a reduction in the active management of the space.

I decided not to actively de-friend participants who wished to remain in contact with me in order to keep the lines of communication open and to foster an ongoing connection, which I will discuss in detail later. While I have not initiated contact with any participant since the end of my fieldwork on Facebook, I have made outputs from my research available to all members of my network accessible, including research participants, in line with my commitment to the merit of my research and the appropriate dissemination of results to participants.

The second change in my research design, not friending the 15–17 year old participants, was more difficult. On the one hand, this meant: (*i*) I would not have access to the profiles of these participants, an element of the research that was important in the interview process; (*ii*) I had to rely more heavily on self-reporting; and (*iii*) also, it limited the avenues through which I could disseminate the results of my research. On the other hand, this allowed me to avoid any invasiveness that my presence in these spaces (even as passive observer) would create.

I was guided in this decision by a conversation I had with a teacher close to one of my participants in the lead up to my first of six interviews with participants under 18 years. This teacher had referred some of her students to my study, and had facilitated the acquisition of informed consent from both the participants and their parents.[6] Although I held a 'Blue Card'[7], issued by the state government that permitted me to work with young people under 18 years in Queensland, and although the teacher assured me that she 'trusted me', she also advised me that it was her policy to leave the door of the room in which the interview was to take place ajar. Leaving the door ajar did not mean that she was present during the interview, but meant that the room in which the interview took place was not closed off. The conduct of the both the young participant and myself was, in this sense, partially visible, but our conversation was still one-on-one. At the time I accepted this without a second thought as standard and routine, but in retrospect, I reflected upon how this consideration—leaving a space open so that my conduct and the conduct of the young person could be peripherally visible to parents or other guardians—might translate to an online social space.

Similarly, the clause in my informed consent package made allowances for the presence of a parent or guardian in the interview (for participants under 18 years) if the participant wanted them present. While no participants accepted this invitation, I also realized that there was no simple translation of this allowance to the online social spaces I was investigating. I could not ask the participants to also friend their parents or guardians, so they could then subsequently have access to the space of the research, as young people often go online to get away from the parental gaze (boyd, 2007a; Stern, 2004; West et al., 2009). Subsequently, despite the impact this decision would have on my fieldwork, I decided that not friending these six younger participants was the most 'ethically sound' solution to the dilemma, adhering to the principles of integrity, beneficence and respect to persons that governed my research and the institutional approval of my research.

The Challenges of Being an Insider

In Bennett's (2002: 460) words, 'knowledge of and familiarity with local surroundings has substantially assisted researchers both in their quest to gain access to particular social groups and settings and in knowing which roles to play once access has been achieved'. Being an 'insider' affords the researcher with a particular set of advantages, but also presents a series of challenges. Participants may, at the very least, take some knowledges for granted, and at the more extreme, feel intimidated by or oppositional to another insider (Hodkinson, 2005: 140).

As a young person myself (older than most of my participants at the time of the research, but not all), and as an active user of both MySpace and Facebook at the time of the research, it was apparent that my insider status played some role in my participants being 'at ease' with me as the researcher and also as a Friend on either MySpace or Facebook. I knew what kind of conduct was appropriate and what kind of conduct would disrupt the social conventions of 'contextual integrity' (Nissenbaum, 2004) of these online spaces. However, my insider status also presented an additional challenge unique to the medium of social network sites.

In friending my participants on Facebook, not only was I given access to their profiles, but they were also given access to mine. On MySpace, creating a research-only profile was not an issue. Facebook's (2010) terms of service, however, prohibit the creation of more than one personal profile. A 'research-only' profile, for instance, would be a violation of these terms. Thus, I had to use my own personal profile for the research. This generated an ethical concern around what constitutes an appropriate relationship between researcher and participant.

As set out in the Australian National Statement on ethical research, referred to earlier: 'where [relationships that] threaten to compromise the research role [develop], researchers must consider whether to modify those relationships, or to modify or even discontinue the research' (NHMRC, 2007). In the interests of maintaining a professional research relationship, I limited the information my participants could access on my profile to only basic details, including my name, my profile pictures (a small, carefully managed album of images I had used as profile or display pictures), my interests (favourite books, films, quotes) and limited information about

my employment and education. Participants could not view my 'wall' (which some of my other Friends could post to), nor could they view images or posts my other Friends had 'tagged' me in. This mechanism of audience segregation was achieved by adding participants to a restricted 'Friend list', a standard Facebook function, to which I assigned specific permissions.[8] Had I violated Facebook's terms of service to create a research profile, I may have avoided some of these ethical dilemmas. However, I may also have compromised a deeper level of rapport with my participants if they had read a largely empty research profile as disingenuous or fake, given my expectation that they would open themselves up to me.

Even providing participants with limited access to my own profile, and thus my own personal life, was an act of distancing in itself, albeit a narrower distance than a dedicated research-only profile. Reinscribing distance in the professional research relationship may have come at the cost of an ongoing two-way 'sense of interaction, participation and involvement' (Rumens, 2008: 16–17) between researcher and participant. Indeed, as Taylor (2011) explains, fostering friendships with participants can be confusing but also deeply rewarding. The 'informant-friend' can become critical to the research process, but there is no single, easy or prescribed way to negotiate this association: 'To guide us in our research, we must equally value and rely upon our strength of character, goodwill, our gut instincts and emotional intelligence as we do our formal training' (Taylor, 2011: 18). At the time the project was designed, perhaps naively, the various 'challenges' associated with friending participants was not seriously considered as they existed somewhere in a murky territory that so many (if not all) questions of ethics emerge from, becoming clear (and important) only upon reflection after the fieldwork.

While beyond the immediate scope of the sets of arguments presented here, the issues raised throughout this article also highlight this potential for a sustained 'friendship' between researcher and participant through social media, destabilizing traditional notions of distance and potentially bringing the participants into latter, 'post-fieldwork' stages of the research and beyond. Facebook's architecture makes it difficult to realize this more equal research partnership without fully opening up the researcher's own personal life as mediated on Facebook to inspection by the participant. While I was unable to realize this potential, future researchers would be encouraged to consider these possibilities in more detail as the social conventions and technical limitations of these spaces change.

Implications for Youth Research

Social network sites continue to operate as key locations upon which youth culture is articulated, played out and made visible. Most recently, see Brown and Gregg's (2012) research on alcohol consumption and 'pedagogies of regret' on Facebook and Dobson's (2012) work on articulations of femininity in MySpace self-mottos. Both articles develop different but ethically reflexive approaches to research that involve social network sites. Brown and Gregg, for instance, advance a 'sympathetic cultural studies' approach, recognizing that researchers are also engaged participants in

online cultures with personal investments in these spaces, destabilizing traditional distinctions between the researcher and the researched. They argue that studying young women's Facebook use from this 'sympathetic', intimate and insider position renders their own analysis more useful and more engaged than studies that identify samples of participants (Brown and Gregg, 2012: 358).

Dobson reflects on the debate and the subsequent changes concerning ethics protocols that govern research involving social network sites, especially around the ethics of consent. At the time Dobson began her research in 2006, the MySpace profiles she was studying were regarded as 'public', but she notes that the site's privacy settings changed over time, as did moral panics about online privacy and scholarly discussions about Internet research ethics. As Zimmer's (2010) critique of the T3 study also demonstrates, conventions in the ethics of research involving social network sites are still evolving, especially around the ethics of consent. If youth researchers are going to continue to engage with these spaces to understand and analyze more effectively youth culture and youth transitions, these conversations about ethics must continue.

Conclusion

Research in online social spaces such as social network sites like MySpace and Facebook, especially research focused on young people who are often at the forefront or in the 'vanguard' (Livingstone, 2008: 394) of emerging social practices in these areas, should not be discouraged. Lewis et al. (2008: 341), the researchers from the problematic T3 study discussed earlier, argue that social network sites can provide researchers with a wealth of sociologically fascinating information from which to draw, potentially 'ushering in a new way of doing social science' (Zimmer, 2010: 323). While I agree at some level with this lofty claim, these sites should not simply be treated as information repositories. For some users, the exchanges that occur on social network sites can be deeply intimate and personal; the 'data' that make these sites so valuable for researchers are also expressions of and mechanisms that facilitate the individual's everyday life.

For the young users of these sites, who attract the greatest portion of both academic and popular attention, these sites also act as archives of transitional moments (Robards, 2012) and serve as important tools in maintaining contact with friends, family and all manner of acquaintances. These sites, in some ways, represent part of the 'reflexive project of the self' (Giddens, 1991) unfolding. Therefore, they must also be understood in these terms and access for researchers should be recognized as a privilege, provided to researchers by participants through appropriate mechanisms of informed consent.

It is clear that social network sites continue to blur the distinction between public and private domains for researchers (Stern, 2004), and between Goffman's (1959) 'frontstage' and 'backstage' (Pearson, 2009), although it must be noted that while these concepts—public and frontstage, private and backstage—should not

be conflated (Hogan, 2010), they are useful in helping researchers conceptualize a methodological approach that adheres to the principles of ethical research outlined earlier in this article. This shifting terrain should not discourage researchers from exploring the wealth of knowledge that the Internet makes visible, but if this research is to be conducted in an ethical manner, it will need to be informed by a growing tradition of scholarship in this area.

Buchanan (2011: 103) suggests that the 'top-down, regulatory' design of institutional-level ethical clearance processes must change to learn from guidelines emerging from research organizations and scholarly communities involved directly in the research itself, such as the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), which published guidelines for the ethical conduct of Internet research in consultation with the group's membership (AoIR and Ess, 2002), and at the time of writing is in the process of updating those guidelines. Further, as Hine (2000) suggests in calling for a reflexive approach to Internet studies, it is also crucial that researchers investigating online social interactions take it upon themselves to learn how to use and 'be' in the sites they are studying.

My own research, as documented in this article, has been far from perfect. From failing to properly think through the ethical concerns associated with friending younger 15–17 year old participants, through to limiting the information my participants could access on my own profile and thus potentially reinscribing a traditional sense of distance between researcher and participant, the imperfections in my research design have taught me much. By listening to the literature as it emerged and having dialogues with my participants on ethics and methodology (even if they did not know this was what we were talking about), I was able to improve my research design 'on the run'. It is my hope that these lessons will prove useful and valuable to the researchers who follow me into these rich, contested and constantly changing spaces.

As social network sites and other still-emerging forms of social media develop, it will continue to be important for not only individual researchers and research teams but also for institutional ethics committees and review boards to recruit expertise to help understand the challenges and evolving ethical dimensions of these spaces, upholding principles of merit and integrity, justice, beneficence and respect for persons. The ethics of research has always been an ongoing, open-ended process, and while many of the long-standing ethical considerations of offline research can be translated to research conducted online, this translation must be an informed and reflective one.

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Notes

1. Consistent with boyd (2007a), I capitalize the term Friend here to describe the category used on social network sites that collapses various social relationships such as family, colleagues and the more traditional notion of friend.
2. Many Facebook profiles have some information accessible to the Internet-using public by default, including at least a profile picture and the name of the profile author, but also a random selection of 'Friends' and interests such as favourite books, movies, music and so on.
3. It should be noted that this third party—Facebook—has been known to change the rules on the flow of information from time to time, redrawing the boundaries between public and private, effectively demonstrating the arbitrary and malleable nature of this dichotomy.
4. All names of participants have been changed to preserve their anonymity. Participants were recruited through a process of selective snowballing, beginning with coursework students at a Gold Coast university in which I had existing networks from programmes including journalism, engineering, public relations, psychology, nursing and creative arts. Subsequent participants were then selected with the intention of diversifying the sample, focusing primarily on individuals with non-tertiary educational backgrounds, including younger (15–17 year old) participants. This selective snowballing resulted in a convenience sample of participants aged 15–27 (with an average age of 20–52 years) from a variety of occupations, including the armed services, real estate, hospitality, retail, childcare and finance. Many of the university students interviewed also undertook casual, part-time or full-time work; three were temporary Gold Coast residents (from Canada, Malaysia and Denmark), while the remaining 37 participants identified as Australian. The single commonality between all participants was that they were young people residing on the Gold Coast and that they all considered themselves users of either Facebook or MySpace.
5. Known elsewhere as an IRB, but similarly charged with ensuring the ethical conduct of research.
6. Explicit consent was not required from the parents or guardians of participants aged 15–18, although all participants were asked to discuss their participation in the research with a parent or guardian before the interview. In accordance with the ethics protocol approved by my university, all of my participants were able to provide their own consent. Participants were also told they could have a parent or guardian present in the interview if they wished.
7. A Blue Card is a licence issued by the Queensland 'Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian' in conjunction with a Queensland Police record check, permitting the holder to work with children in Queensland, Australia.
8. It is important to note here that these 'permissions' exist at the whim of that third party invoked by Hogan (2010)—Facebook. Facebook could potentially change these permissions, 're-drawing' the boundaries yet again.

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