Social Media Research Ethics:
Preliminary Considerations

Module Case Studies and Worksheet

Review the case studies below and make notes as you participate in the Social Media Research Ethics: Preliminary Considerations module. While you may use this worksheet in whichever way works best for you, you may wish to:

1. Pause the module when prompted by the facilitators to review the case studies and jot down some initial thoughts. What ethical challenges or concerns are raised by the case study? What questions do you have about the design of this research project?
2. Add to your notes as you continue listening to the module. What methodological and ethical considerations can you bring to each case study?
3. Review your notes at the end of the module, and identify any further points. What additional considerations, questions, or concerns do these scenarios raise for you?

Case Study 1

Researchers wish to study how Facebook is being used by people in Australia in the aftermath of the February 2020 bushfires. They plan to conduct an in-depth qualitative analysis of Facebook pages used by local people to communicate and organize, both during the extended states of emergency and in the recovery period. Some of the Facebook pages are private (though anyone can request to join them) and some are public. The pages discuss a wide range of topics, including: people searching for missing or displaced family, friends, and pets; memorial posts; information about access to provisions and shelter; fundraising initiatives; and wildlife rescue efforts. The researchers plan to explore the pages, take notes, and capture screenshots of typical posts, comments, and photographs.

Adapted from the Sheffield University Research Ethics Committee workshop, 2016.

Case Study 2

A researcher wishes to use Tinder to study public interactions on social dating platforms. Although the posts being studied are public (rather than through private messaging), she needs to sign up to Tinder to view them. By signing up, she has to fill in a registration form including questions such as 'I am a woman looking for a man/woman.' The users of the platform are aware that a very large number of people use Tinder and are potentially able to access their profile. The researcher is also aware that there may be people under the age of 18 using the platform.

Adapted from Leanne Townsend and Claire Wallace (2016).

Case Study 3

Working during the COVID-19 pandemic, a group of researchers aim to conduct a network analysis and sentiment analysis of Twitter users using the hashtag #stayhome. They plan to use an online commercial tool to collect the tweets. The data provides its service legally and in line with Twitter's terms of service. The Twitter data they gather will be fully identifiable. They also want to visualize how sentiment about the pandemic emerged over time amongst different networks of Twitter users, and plan to make an interactive online visualization in which users will be able to zoom in on particular areas of the network to view specific tweets and their submitting users.

Adapted from the Sheffield University Research Ethics Committee workshop, 2016.

Case Study 4

A researcher is conducting a review of motherhood and childhood blogs and wants to consider the role of narrative, blog design, photography, and community participation in shaping online presentations of motherhood. The research will focus on eight sample blogs: four of the bloggers also offer parenting advice through online publications or interviews; two of the bloggers have forthcoming print publications; one blogger established the blog within the last 18 months; and one blogger recently announced a hiatus and has not returned to full-time blogging at the time of research. The researcher plans to gather qualitative data passively by reviewing blog posts, visual elements, and user comments.

Adapted from Nadia von Benzon (2018).

As an optional final case study, describe a research project involving social media data with which you are familiar (e.g. a past or current course paper, a proposed research project). Briefly describe the project, then make note of the methodological and ethical considerations that may accompany this social media research.

Case Study 5