TECH3022-17 Advanced Social Media Production

Investigation Plan: Netnography Internet Specific Ethical Questions

1   Introduction:

"The Internet has frequently been understood by social scientists as providing a new space for social interaction and for the development of social formations, and innovation in research methods is needed to address these new spaces. However, this does not mean that the traditional sites of research into everyday life become irrelevant" (Hine, 2005, p. 109).

"Data collection in netnography means communicating with members of a culture or community. That involvement, engagement, contact, interaction, communion, relation, collaboration and connection with community members – not with a website, server, or a keyboard, but with the people on the other end"(Kozinets 2010).

"Netnography is a specialised type of ethnography. It uses and incorporates different methods in a single approach focused on the study of communities and cultures in the Internet age. Qualitative online research such as netnography is 'essential in shaping our understanding of the Internet, its impact on culture, and culture's impacts on the Internet"(Kozinets 2010).

"We identify eight fundamental areas in which ethnographers should consider the ethics of the impacts of their research on informants. These areas – informed consent, mitigation of institutional risk, anonymity, deception, sex and intimacy, compensation, taking leave, and accurate portrayal" (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, p. 130).

To which we can add, Entering the Field, Negotiating with Gatekeepers, Confidentiality and Harm, Protecting the Under-Eighteens.

2   Entering the Field:

"First, although they needn't accept the viability of the viewpoints of those they encounter as reference points for all matters of personal activity,, ethnographers are faced with the task of acquiring perspectives, or at least attaining a good working familiarity with the world views of those they purport to study" (Prus 1996).

"Like others who venture into particular arenas and attempt to deal with the people (often strangers) they encounter there, ethnographers may find themselves dealing with considerable am-

biguity, uncertainty, and stage fright. Not only do they attempt to learn about and define the parameters of the field, but they must also tentatively envision their own lines of action and contemplate ways of approaching and relating to these in the field" (Prus 1996).

"Given the complex, ambiguous and emergent nature of human relations, there is no definitive set of instructions that can provide to insure success in the field" (Prus 1996).

"There my be times when people in the settings expect researchers to protect auras of significance, but for the most part I've found that people very much appreciate contract with someone who is genuinely interested in learning about, as opposed to trying to impress them. In this regard, I've become more attentive to the importance of explaining things to people, telling them of my own limited knowledge in the area, and asking them if they would like to help me with the project at hand" (Prus 1996).

"This initial effort to establish intersubjectivity is complicated by the fact that while participants may be open, sincere, and cooperative, they may also resist and deceive researchers by both concealing and selectively revealing information. As well, participants may unintentionally forget, become confused, and otherwise inadvertently mislead researchers" (Prus 1996).

"This means that researchers are faced not only with the task of selecting and organising material that depict in central manners the lived experiences of the other, but also with selecting ways of conveying and contextualising these to prospective readers so that they find these experiences (transcontextually) meaningful and comprehensible" (Prus 1996).

"Ethnography cannot be done on the side, nor is it an enterprise to undertake lightly" (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, p. 76).

3   Gatekeepers:
"Negotiating entrée via group gatekeepers is something that often has to be done when working with more formal organisations or groups that keep tighter boundaries around themselves" (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, p. 77).

"Ethnographers cannot simply observe because, by definition, we must *participate* in the fieldsite" (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, p. 142).

4   Maintaining Intimacy:

"Given their goal of achieving intimate familiarity with the life-worlds of the other in a more comprehensive sense, researchers may wish to be mindful of the sorts of affiliations that they develop with particular others in the setting. These may significantly affect researchers' abilities to access other people in the setting as well as their opportunities to learn more fully about the life-worlds at hand" (Prus 1996).

"In addition to the challenges entailed in learning about the life-worlds of the other in more direct sense, ethnographers face the task of managing their own emotional states (as private experiences) as well as the ways in which they express any emotional themes to others" (Prus 1996).

"In working with people, it is also important that researchers try to adopt and sustain a *congenial disposition* throughout their contract with the field"(Prus 1996).

"*Maintaining composure* is somewhat related to the matter of congeniality, but draws attention to the importance of researchers developing a more, trustworthy image or reputation in the setting. Composure should not be taken as synonymous with a lack of interest, but rather denotes an element of balanced control over oneself in the field situation" (Prus 1996).

"Researchers may inadvertently and innocently become embroiled in matters beyond their control, but it is more unfortunate when they are the source of their own undoing" (Prus 1996).

"Encouraging open conversations, reassuring them that there is no right answer, and providing positive feedback will all help to build the special report to crucial to a successful interview" (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, p. 95).

"One of our goals as interviewers should be to help people feel authorised to speak freely, to honour their expertise and encourage them to convey their insights to us" (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, p. 99).

"Informants will, however, remember us, the ethnographers. They will recall our gifts of listening, the deep interest displayed in small details of their lives, and the way we took care to discern and

follow the complexities and enigmas of their everyday pursuits and dreams" (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, p. 150).

5   Informed Consent:

"Inherent in the nature of ethnography and netnography, the researcher must constantly maintain a tension, taking back and community and culture, and the more abstract and distanced worlds of theory, words, generality, and research focus"(Kozinets 2010).

"The foundation of an ethical netnography is honesty between the researcher and online community members"(Kozinets 2010).

"From the beginning of the research through to its end, good netnographic research ethics dictates that the researcher: (1) openly and accurately identifies her or himself, avoiding all deception, (2) openly and accurately describes their research purpose for interacting with community members, and (3) provides an accessible, relevant, and accurate description of their research focus and interests. Finally, it is highly recommended that the netnographer set up a research web-page providing positive identification as well as a more detailed explanation of the research and its purpose, and perhaps should eventually share the initial, interim, and final research findings with online community members"(Kozinets 2010).

- Will informed consent be required from participants?
- If so, what procedures to obtain consent will be followed? (E.g., print or digital signatures, virtual consent tokens, click boxes or waiver of documented consent).
- Will consent be obtained just from individuals or from communities and online system administrators?
- In situations whereby consent is desired but written informed consent is impossible (or in regulatory criteria, impracticable) or potentially harmful, will procedures or requirements be modified?
- What harm might result from asking for consent, or through the process of asking for consent?
- What ethical concerns might arise if informed consent is not obtained?
- If an ethics board deems no consent is required, will the researcher still seek subjects'/participants' consent in a non-regulatory manner?
- If informed consent is warranted, how will the researcher ensure that participants are truly informed?

Consent Letters…

6   Institutional Risk:
"When not placed on a pedestal above participant observations and other qualitative approaches, quantitative methods can play a valuable role in some ethnographic research projects" (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, p. 128).

- Does our research adequately protect the researcher and their organisation, as well as the community/author/participant?
- What are potential benefits associated with this study?
- Who benefits from the study - do the potential participants? If not, what greater benefit justifies the potential risks?
- Is the research aiming at a good or desirable goal and how does this fit in with the goals of the supporting organisation?
- Can we be sure the data collected from online sites, fora, communities, is "legitimate" and "valuable" and what procedures and process of monitoring and approval must it go through to be supported by the organisation?
- How are we recognizing the autonomy of others and acknowledging that they are of equal worth to ourselves and should be treated so?

7   Anonymity:
"In ethnographic research, identifying a person potentially identifies their social network" (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, p. 141).

"In many cases, a blog, Facebook page, or Twitter feed for our research project might provide a way to show we care about our informants while keeping our private lives, and the private lives of informants, reasonably separate" (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, p. 146).

"Ethnography results in neither bodily harm nor psychological distress: it typically carries what is termed 'informational risk', the risk that private information could be made public" (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, p. 133).

8   Confidentiality:

"If we have acquired privileged information in interviews or conversations, it should not be discussed as the conflict unfolds, or even in its aftermath, unless we are certain it will cause no harm" (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, p. 137).

"Upholding the confidentiality and anonymity of our participants is central. Keeping in mind the unanticipated consequences if people's identities and activities were revealed should promote reflectivity on our part when deciding what is important to include in the written work" (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, p. 138).

9   Deception:

"Netnographers should *never, under any circumstances*, engage in identity deception"(Kozinets 2010).

"The very basis of the data gathering activity of ethnography is compromised, if not destroyed, through deception" (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, p. 143).

"Deceiving informants remains firmly outside the bounds of ethical ethnographic research" (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, p. 142).

10   Sex & Intimacy:

"We must use our best judgement, operating from the core principle of care, as to not only what is public versus private from an etic perspective, but also what the people we study empirically perceive as public or private. Such notions will vary from one culture to the next" (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, p. 135).

"Ethnographers strive to avoid negative outcomes by playing special attention to the potential consequences and risks of what we see and hear, and remembering that not everything is grist for the data mill, no matter how interesting it may be" (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, p. 137).

[Emic and etic, in anthropology, folkloristics, and the social and behavioral sciences, refer to two kinds of field research done and viewpoints obtained; from within the social group (from the perspective of the subject) and from outside (from the perspective of the observer). http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emic_and_etic]

11 Protecting the Under Eighteens:

- What particular issues might arise around the issue of minors or vulnerable persons?

- Are minors being excluded from the study because of the difficulties of getting ethical permission to study them?

- In situations where identity, age, and ability of the participant is unknown or hidden, and harm cannot be determined as an a priori category based on known vulnerability of participant, how will harm be considered as an ethical concern and operationalized in the study?

- How are minors identified as 'minors' in contexts where demographic information is not required?

- What harm might result from asking (or not asking) for participants to reveal their age?

- How will parental or guardian consent be obtained in addition to assent where required by research regulations? What risks might arise in this particular consent process? (for any or all parties, including the minor, the parents, and the researcher)?

12 Compensation:

- How are findings presented?

- What immediate or future risk might occur by using exact-quoted material in published reports? (For example, while a participant might not think his or her information is sensitive now, this might change in five years. What protections might be put in place to anticipate changing perceptions?)

- Are individuals adequately protected in pre-publication reports, such as workshops, conferences, or informal meetings?

- Could materials be restricted because of copyright? (For example, many countries have strong restrictions on using screenshots or images taken from the web without permission.

- Certain sites have restrictions in their terms of service. Whereas there may be allowances for the scholarly use of copyrighted materials without permission, such as the U.S. doctrine of fair use, this is not a guarantee of protection against copyright infringement.)

- How are texts/persons/data being studied?

- Does one's method of analysis require exact quoting and if so, what might be the ethical consequence of this in the immediate or long term? (For example, would quoting directly from a blog cause harm to the blogger and if so, could another method of representation be less risky?)

What are the ethical expectations of the research community associated with a particular approach (e.g, ethnographic, survey, linguistic analysis)?

- Do one's disciplinary requirements for collecting, analyzing, or representing information clash with the specific needs of the context? If so, what are the potential ethical consequences?

13   Taking Leave:

Can participants in the research study ask to leave the study at any time, and what will happen to the data that has been accumulated so far?

14   Accurate Portrayal:

"A basic principle of ethnographic research is that we should take our lead from our informants, following them to wherever they engage irrelevant activity" (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, p. 118).

"A key consequence of this asymmetry is the imperative that the ethnographer 'take good care' of information. This notion goes beyond simply doing no harm; it means ensuring, to the greatest extent possible, that informants gain some reward from participating in research" (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, p. 129).

"We must commit, ethically, to whatever it takes to experience the activities where the data we require are generated" (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, p. 150).

"The point is not that everything that we write should be readable by the communities studies, or by an and all academic communities; it is that we should write in the clearest manner possible that is appropriate for a particular genre" (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, p. 150).

"Overall, then, the ethnographic enterprise hinges on engaging others in ethical conversation and preparing careful, accurate accounts that do not compromise informants" (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, p. 150).

15   Harm:

"The very act of participating in a community changes the nature of later data analysis. This is what makes ethnography and netnography so thoroughly different from techniques such as content analysis or social network analysis. A content analyst would scan the archives of online communities, but

she or he would not be reading them deeply for their cultural information, pondering them and seeking to learn from them how to live in this community and to identify as a community member. This is the task of the netnographer" (Kozinets 2010).

"Ethnographers, netnographers, and other qualitative researchers have no such clear and measurable standards of evaluation"(Kozinets 2010).

"Care is a core value to be internalised and acted on through the vigilance and commitment of the researcher. Any sets of research ethics guidelines and dicta will be ineffective if researchers do not have embedded into their practice strong values establishing ethical behaviour built on the principle of care" (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, p. 129).

"The principle of care arises in part from asymmetrical power relations and imbalance of benefit between investigator and investigated" (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, p. 129).

"If we cannot know in advance if harm will occur because determination of harm is 'an empirical question', then acceptability is 'unknown'. How can informed content be informed when the nature of the potential harm is not assessed until after the fact" (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, p. 132).

- What are the potential harms or risks associated with this study?
- What is the potential harm or risk for individuals, for online communities, for researchers, for research?
- Are risks being assessed throughout the study as well as in advance of the study? (Harm is only certain after it occurs. Thus, a priori assessments of risk might be useful but inadequate).
- How are the concepts of 'vulnerability' and 'harm' being defined and operationalized in the study? How are risks to the community/author/participant being assessed?
- How is vulnerability determined in contexts where this categorization may not be apparent?
- Would a mismatch between researcher and community/participant/author definitions of 'harm' or 'vulnerability' create an ethical dilemma? If so, how would this be addressed?
- What harms--to life, to career, to reputation--may occur from the research? (e.g., would the research "out" an LGBTQ individual who is not publicly out and perhaps cause them to lose their jobs? Would the research cause someone to face criminal or civil penalties?)

- What possible privacy-related harms may occur? For example, might online groups disband or individuals cease to use an online support group or withdraw from blogging activities because of the presence of researchers; Might individuals be upset that their perceived privacy has been violated; might individuals object to having their writing or speech anonymised, preferring to remain known and public in any published results?

- Who or what else could cause harm to the author/participant beyond the researcher? Are we acting in ways that minimizes risk?

16 Study Objectives:
- What is the primary object of study?

- How will these objectives be stated?

"The data collection methods that are required for this study will take the form of recorded interviews, questionnaires, surveys, interviews, online discussion boards, observations of online activity and discussion forums, practical observation, and recording of workshops. The research project involves gathering information from voluntary participants, community volunteers and community organisations representatives working in volunteer-based community media organisations. The research will be gathered by undertaking recorded semi-structured interviews. These data collection methods will be used to identify to what extent, and in what way, the volunteers of different community media groups use social media as a practical tool for the development of content, as a social tool for the development of relationships, and as a method of facilitating communication. The initial pilot study will trail and assess the potential methods that might be used in the extended study period. The initial aim of the pilot study is to identify and note a broad range of issues, following from which further focus on more convergent research imperatives can be defined. The research will be based on the observations of human behaviour as volunteers participate in the development of content and associated services."

17 Context:
- How is the context defined and conceptualized?

- Does the research definition of the context match the way owners, users, or members might define it? (Parameters such as 'culture,' 'person,' 'data set,' and 'public text' each carry different ethical expectations for researchers).

- Are there distinctions between local contextual norms for how a venue is conceptualized and jurisdictional frameworks (e.g., Terms of Service, other regulations)? For example, if the TOS defines the space as off limits for researchers but the individuals want to participate in public research of this space, what risk might exist for either the researcher or individuals involved?

- What are the ethical expectations users attach to the venue in which they are interacting, particularly around issues of privacy? Both for individual participants as well as the community as a whole?

- How is the context (venue/participants/data) being accessed?

- How are participants/authors situated in the context?

- How are participants/authors approached by the researcher?

- How is the researcher situated in the context?

- If access to an online context is publicly available, do members/participants/authors perceive the context to be public?

18 Participants:
- What considerations might be necessary to accommodate 'perceived privacy' or the notion that individuals might care more about the appropriate flow of information as defining it as public or private?

- Who is involved in the study?

- What are the ethical expectations of the community/participants/authors?

19 Researchers Role:
- What is the ethical stance of the researcher? (For example, a mismatch between the ethical stance of the researcher and the community/participant/author may create ethical complications).

- What are the ethical traditions of researchers' and/or author/participants' cultures or countries?

20 Data Management:
- If research data is housed in a repository for reuse, how might individuals or communities be affected later? For example, data collected for one purpose might be reused later for a different purpose but the researcher's relationship with the community from which the data came no longer exists.

- What possible risk or harm might result from reuse and publication of this information?

- What are the ethical expectations commonly associated with these types of data? (For example, working with aggregated, de-identified data carries different ethical expectations than working with interview data.)

- Does the object of analysis include persons or texts beyond the immediate parameters outlined by the study? What are the potential ethical consequences and how might these be addressed? (For example, collecting data from a blog often includes comments; collecting data from one social media stream reveals links to people or data outside the specific scope of the study.)

- If information collected in the course of a study can be linked back to an individual by means of internet search or other technology, what process will the researcher use to determine how that

information will be treated? (For example, many challenges surround the responsible use of images and video).

- To what extent might data be considered by participants to be personal and private, or public and freely available for analysis and republication?

- What other questions might arise as a result of the particular context from which this data was collected?

- How are data being managed, stored, and represented?

- What method is being used to secure and manage potentially sensitive data?

- What unanticipated breaches might occur during or after the collection and storage of data or the production of reports? (For example, if an audience member recorded and posted sensitive material presented during an in-house research presentation, what harms might result?

- If the researcher is required to deposit research data into a repository for future use by other researchers (or wishes to do so), what potential risks might arise? What steps should be taken to ensure adequate anonymity of data or to unlink this data from individuals?

- What are the potential ethical consequences of stripping data of personally identifiable information?

- How might removal of selected information from a dataset distort it such that it no longer represents what it was intended to represent?

- If future technologies (such as automated textual analysis or facial recognition software) make it impossible to strip personally identifiable information from data sets in repositories, what potential risks might arise for individuals?

- Can this be addressed by the original researcher? If so, how? How will this impact subsequent researchers and their data management?

21   Research Management Statement:
- By using ethnographic research techniques this study will attempt to identify and validate the processes that are emerging through social media participation.

- These processes are largely meaning driven, and depend on a specific and contingent social context to make sense.

- Information will be collected and organised reflexively, with the experience of the researcher playing as important a role as the participants who are being represented.

- This information will be drawn from experiences taking place in the field, through specific activities taking place in the main location of production and online.

- This information will be represented using descriptive techniques.

- Theory and abstraction will only be built-up once sufficient descriptive examples have been accumulated.

As such, this study will ask:

- How concepts of social media are used by participants engaged in different communities?
- How the experience of social media networks are made sense of by participants in different social media groups associated with food, diet and health ?
- How the structure of different food, diet and health communities are informed by the practices of agents acting with a social media mind-set?
- How participants involved in different food, diet and health communities behave, act and communicate when using or producing content using social media techniques?
- What kind of interpersonal dynamics occur between agents using and producing social media content in different food, diet and health communities?
- What topics are discussed, and what information, opinions and beliefs are exchanged among the participants in different food, diet and health in relation to social media?

A range of ethical issues are expected to impact on these studies as data will be collected using a mixed methodological approach that might include participant observation, digital ethnography and forms of action research. However the mechanism of specific research practices has not yet been identified, and therefore the impact on ethical assessment cannot yet be made in detail.

22 Researchers Actions:
Likely issues to be dealt with by the researcher include:

- Close and open communication among the volunteers involved.
- Ensuring that any relevant persons, committees and authorities have been consulted, and that the principles guiding the work are accepted in advance by all.
- Deciding if participants are allowed to influence the work, and respecting the wishes of those who do not wish to participate.

- Developing the work in a visible and open form that respects the principles of social collaboration but maintains data integrity and confidentiality.

- Obtaining appropriate permissions before making observations or examining documents produced for other purposes.

- Negotiating and gaining consensus on the description of the work of others and acknowledging any concerns prior to publication.

- Accepting responsibility for maintaining confidentiality.

- Ensuring a balance is struck between decisions made about the direction of the projects and the probable outcome of the research as an academically publishable document.

- The researchers is explicit about the nature of the research process from the beginning, including all personal biases and interests

- There is appropriate access to information generated by the process for all participants

The researcher and the initial design team must create a process that maximizes the opportunities for involvement of all participants.

[Adapted from http://www.web.net/~robrien/papers/arfinal.html]

The researcher will identify the following:

- Matrix of key issues for on-going monitoring.
- Timeline and milestone plan setting out key objectives.
- Prioritisation matrix mapping risk factors associated with any proposed activities.
- Review and monitoring of data management systems and audit of actions and responsibilities resulting from changes to the data and its use.

23   Guidelines & Policies:

A full ethics and data integrity review proposal will be submitted to the Faculty of Technology Research Ethics Committee before any pilot or preparatory studies are undertaken. The researcher will make reference to the recommended faculty codes of practice, but will further develop this as part of the methodology planning and review:

- SRA - Ethical Guidelines
- ESRC Research Ethics Framework
- BCS code of conduct
- Ethics in Government Social Research

http://www.dmu.ac.uk/faculties/technology/current_students/hre/forms_links.jsp
http://www.theasa.org/downloads/ASA%20ethics%20guidelines%202011.pdf

http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/34088_Chapter4.pdf

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