Research on Applied Ethics
Ethics in Social Media Research

Overview

The enormous growth of social media usage has led to an increasing accumulation of data. Social media platforms offer many possibilities of data formats, including textual data, pictures, videos, sounds, and geolocations (Stieglitz et al., 2018). This diverse social media data has spawned numerous attractive opportunities for researchers and practitioners to analyse social media users and their behaviour.

In general, social media data can be used for the benefit of individuals and society. For example, by analysing social media data one might develop a better understanding about thoughts and preferences of people on such things as political or social topics. During crisis situations, social media analysis might help to identify useful information in real-time. For companies, social media could be investigated to identify new trends in client behaviour or ways to improve their products. Therefore, social media can be analysed by journalists, political parties and companies to target their products and ideas to social media users who are the most open to their messages. This form of microtargeting is one example that raises a scientific and societal discussion about the ethical implications of profiling social media users. While some users might enjoy being confronted with news, politics and advertisements which match their mindset, the profiling of social media users can be a double-edged sword. The often highly personal data i.e. extracted social media data, can range from sexual orientation and religious beliefs to ethnic background, and might be misused. For instance, undemocratic societies could be interested in identifying potential regime opponents, and also the leaders of democratic societies can misuse social media data to spread fake news and influence opinion formation processes, as was highlighted by the Cambridge Analytica Scandal.

Social media analytics presents IS researchers with typical epistemic concerns. The way that conclusions are drawn from the data that is tracked by researchers can lead to inconclusive, inscrutable and misguided evidence (Mittelstadt et al., 2016). So there is a huge ethical concern for academics and industry alike, as wrong conclusions about individuals might be drawn, bearing in mind that social networks do not always reflect the society as a whole for e.g. the widely researched platform Twitter appears to attract a specific type of user (Boyd and Crawford, 2012). Researchers sometimes lose track of what are simple correlations of data and what can be interpreted as a causal connection (Illari and Russo, 2014).

Researchers now find themselves in a conflict with ethical concerns and data protection regulations and research objectives including the analysis of personal data that may contribute to the greater good of society (Bunker et al., 2019). If this conflict limits the possibilities of researchers to investigate and understand social media platforms, it will increase the knowledge divide between platform providers, that own and use all the data, and researchers who are limited by restricted access, terms of trade and ethical concerns. The analysis of social media data in crisis situations to support emergency service agencies, is one example where such research has a morally good aim. Researchers, but also journalists, politicians and managers need to ask what constitutes ethical rules and approaches of responsible social media analysis (Zook et al., 2017)?

Besides ethical behaviour towards social media research, consequences for the researchers need also to be reflected. For example, analysing violent content (e.g. videos, images, texts) can have harmful psycho-social impact on the researcher.

Information systems as a discipline has the ability to suggest and design technical solutions that can support ethical behaviour and avoid problematic actions (e.g. by digital nudging). But until now this has not been well considered within the design of software tools for researchers.

Call for Papers

This special section aims to develop scholarship which discusses and develops: a) the current status of ethics in social media analysis (SMA); b) the conflict between protecting the individual and research for a greater good; and c) the measures IS researchers should take to establish ethical guidelines for SMA.

This special section also seeks to start a discussion on the role of ethics in social media research. While we are looking for scientific papers based on empirical studies we will also consider conceptual papers, researcher reflections on past projects, essays and opinion pieces that argumentatively tackle important issues which address the special section theme.

Typical topics of interest for this special section may be (but are not limited to):

- Current ethical practices in social media research i.e. problems and issues;

- Theoretical consideration of ethics in social media research;

- Pitfalls and challenges of strict ethical regulations;

- Issues in the development of ethical frameworks;

- Problems confronting researchers in the implementation of ethical research approaches in social media;

- Digital nudging as an approach to promote ethical behaviour;

- Psycho-social impact of social media research on the researcher;

- Designing information systems to address ethical challenges;

- Individual right to protection versus research for the greater good; and

- Provision and use of effective financial, personal and technological resources to conduct ethical SMA.

Authors are encouraged to check with one of the special section editors, prior to paper submission, if they feel their paper many be at the boundary of the theme.

Key Dates

Submissions Due: 21 September 2020
1st Round Acceptances: 20 December, 2020
2nd Round Review Submissions: 20 February, 2021
Final Paper Acceptances: 20 March, 2021

Special Section Editors

Deborah Bunker is a leading international scholar in organizational collaboration and change management in complex organizational and environmental settings. She is a Chief Investigator on an EU Horizon 2020 project RISE_SMA Social Media Analytics for Society and

Crisis Communication and a Norwegian Research Council SAMRISK Work Program project INSITU Sharing Incident and Threat Information During Crises. Deborah is Chair and Convener of the Communications and Technology for Society Research Group and immediate past Chair of the International Federation of Information Processing (IFIP) Working Group 8.6 (Transfer and Diffusion of IT). She is also a Member of the Australian Academy of Science National Committee for Information and Communication Sciences and a Multi-Disciplinary Advisory Board Member of the Marie Bashir Institute (MBI) at the University of Sydney. Deborah has also been a Member of the Research Evaluation Committee (Mathematics, Information and Computing Sciences Panel) for the Excellence in Research for Australia evaluation process (ERA 2018, 2015), Past President (2012 - 2014) of the Australian Council of Professors and Heads of IS (ACPHIS) and General (2011, 2014), Program (2005, 2011, 2019) and Doctoral Consortium (2017) Chair of the Australasian Conference in Information Systems. She has been a Track Co-Chair for the International Conference on IS (ICIS 2015, 2018) and was also a Program Co-Chair for the inaugural ICSRAM Asia Pacific Conference in Wellington, in November 2018. Professor Bunker is Senior Editor for Information Technology and People and is also a Section Editor for the Australasian Journal of Information Systems. She can be contacted at deborah.bunker@sydney.edu.au

Stefan Stieglitz is professor at the department of Computer Science and Applied Cognitive Science at the University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany. Prior to his current position he was an assistant professor for information systems at University of Münster. In his research he investigates social media analytics in various domains such as business, politics, and crisis communication. Moreover, he analyses user behavior and technology adaption of collaborative information systems in organizational contexts. Stefan is coordinator and principal investigator of the EU Horizon 2020 project "RISE_SMA - Social Media Analytics for Society and Crisis Communication". Moreover, he is director and founder of the Competence Center Connected Organization which enforced knowledge exchange between academia and practice. His work has been recognized with the AIS Best Information Systems Publications Award in 2016. Stefan published various articles in reputable journals such as Journal of Management Information System, European Journal of Information Systems, Business and Information Systems Engineering, International Journal of Information Management, and MISQe.

Shirlee-ann Knight is a lecturer/unit coordinator in the School of Management, at Curtin University. She has held this position for six years, teaching in the area of Database, Database Design, Business Software Tools & Intelligence, and more recently is the unit coordinator of the Faculty of Business & Law's business-core undergraduate unit – Introduction to Business Information Systems.

Prior to her current role, Dr Knight was a cross-disciplinary researching academic for 5 years (post-doctoral research fellow) at Edith Cowan University (ECU) working as a researcher and research/project supervisor across 3 schools in the Faculty of Computing, Health & Science, incl. School of Computer & Security Science (SCSS); School of Exercise & Health Sciences (SEHS); and School of Nursing & Midwifery (SNM). Using expertise in both quantitative and qualitative research approaches, she specialised in the analysis of complex relationships existent between natural/biological and built/engineered aspects of information systems and how this can help build more intelligent information and business systems in the context of Health ICT.

Dr Knight's current research now sees her actively involved with the Health Promotion and Education group at Telethon Kids Institute (TKI) where her expertise in Human Computer Interaction is used in multiple projects designing Health Behaviour Mobile/Smart-phone "Apps". She can be contacted at s.knight@curtin.edu.au

AJIS Submission / Author guidelines including the URL are available at: http://journal.acs.org.au/index.php/ajis/about/submissions

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