

Ethical Obligations When Asking Research Participants to View Unpredictable Content

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INTRODUCTION

Research projects often involve asking participants to view and interact with online or video content. To some extent, researchers can predict the type of content that participants may end up viewing based on past content on that platform. For example, when Harboe et al. [3] asked groups of participants to watch television and interact remotely, they knew that the content participants may watch was bounded by what television shows were broadcast on a set of existing television channels.

Asking study participants to view content becomes somewhat more complicated in the case of live streamed video. Live video is often used to present mundane content such as chatting or documenting a gathering of people, or for fun entertaining events like festivals and concerts. However in recent months, live video has also become a common format used to quickly spread information about tragic events like Philandro Castille's murder and the shooting in Dallas, Texas, to document excessive police violence, and to broadcast breaking news events like the July 2016 Turkish military uprising. In these types of live streams, it is impossible to know in advance whether the outcome will be violent or innocuous. Many Black Lives Matter rallies end peacefully, and many people are pulled over by police without being murdered. Yet when tragedy does occur, if the event is live streamed, then the tragedy has an audience beyond those physically present. When live video transports a viewer "unexpectedly in the middle of a breaking news story with unpredictable outcomes, the video is not just compelling, it's *visceral*" [2]. Platforms like Facebook have taken steps to address viewers' sensitivity to tragic live video content, but current policies and practices are not able to address such issues fully and in real time [1].

People can choose to watch or to not watch difficult, uncomfortable, or violent live streamed content. Some will make the decision that it is more important to bear witness than to be comfortable. Others will be unable or unwilling to continue watching. However, what if a viewer has been asked to view a live stream as part of a research study in which they are a participant? What are the researchers' ethical obligations in such instances? This is the case we examine in the following case study.

CASE STUDY

In June 2016, we began a study about the emerging sociotechnical phenomenon of live streamed video as a way to remotely view events. By events, we mean sports, concerts, breaking news, and other emergent activities that live streamers choose to share with the world. In the first phase of our study, we asked participants to view and interact with live streamed content from a series of particular events (of our choosing) on Periscope and Facebook Live for a period of 15 minutes. We went through our organization's ethical review process, and the reviewers and we agreed that the study posed only minimal risk to participants.

The first few events we asked participants to view were relatively innocuous – a basketball game, a video game convention, and an online video convention. The next event was the San Francisco LGBT Pride festival and parade. Just weeks before, 49 people had been killed in an LGBT nightclub in Orlando, Florida, the most deadly mass shooting in U.S. history. When the first author began to watch live streamed content during the designated time that participants were asked to view content from the Pride parade, he began to realize the unanticipated ethical risks to which we had subjected participants. As a drag queen streamed herself giving commentary, the parade in full swing behind her, hateful comments from strangers appeared on bottom of the screen, containing homophobic and transphobic slurs. Though no explicit threats were made on this particular stream, it became immediately apparent that we as researchers had placed participants into a situation where something tragic and violent could occur.

Live streams are exciting and compelling because of the sense that anything *can* happen but no one knows what *will* happen. However, this same feature that is compelling in some instances is terrifying in others. We had not anticipated the hateful and harassing comments that appeared on the SF Pride live streams, let alone the potential for tragedy or violence. We had no plans in place for how to refer participants to deal with post-trauma distress had they been witness to a live streamed event turned violent. Though the consent form stated that they could opt out of the study at any time, would participants think to do so if tragedy struck?

Is live streaming unpredictable in a way that other research contexts are not? No and yes. Content can turn harassing and hateful in any social media context. In lab studies involving more than one participant, a participant may make rude remarks to or even assault the other(s). Studies involving video chat are similarly unpredictable. Yet in the particular global context of summer 2016, with its frequency of deadly attacks (e.g., the Orlando massacre, the Dallas police shootings, the attacks in Nice, France, and the murders of Philandro Castille, Alton Sterling, and many others), live streamed events may be a particularly risky context to ask participants to watch. Even though nothing tragic happened at San Francisco Pride 2016, the event's occurrence so soon after the Orlando massacre meant that the possibility of violence, no matter how small the actual probability, was especially salient for Pride attendees and live stream broadcasters, as well as the participants in our study.

In retrospect it seems obvious that asking participants to view events via live streamed video may be ethically complicated. However, our study design and ethics review came before the Orlando massacre and many of the violent events of summer 2016. San Francisco Pride seemed like a happy occasion that would be pleasant for participants in our study to view, most of whom we chose because they had attended Pride festivals in the past on their own accord. Unpredictability seemed exciting, not pernicious. We urge those researching emerging, unpredictable sociotechnical phenomena like live video to fully consider ethical obligations to participants, though they may not be initially apparent.

We offer several potential ways for researchers to meet ethical obligations in research studies that ask participants to view unpredictable online or video content. First, researchers should explicitly alert participants to the study's unpredictability, such as (in our case) explicitly stating that live events have the potential to turn violent or tragic. Next, instead of a generic opt-out clause, researchers should give participants explicit permission to opt out of the study in the event that the participant views content that makes them uncomfortable. Finally, researchers should debrief with participants and provide resources (e.g., counselors, trauma hotlines, etc.) for those who encountered disturbing

material in the course of the study. Though these suggestions may begin to address the issues discussed in this paper, we look forward to discussing further ideas regarding researchers' ethical obligations at this Group workshop.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

Oliver L. Haimson is a Ph.D. candidate in the Informatics Department at University of California, Irvine and a summer 2016 Microsoft Research intern. His research focuses on how people represent and disclose changing and faceted identities on social media during life transitions. His Microsoft Research internship project examines how and why people view and share live video during events.

John C. Tang is a Senior Researcher at Microsoft Research where he designs and studies new tools to support connecting people over distance. His research has focused on supporting remote collaboration, using a range of technologies (video, instant messaging, rhythmic patterns) in diverse contexts (distributed work teams, long-distance social connections). He not only researches distributed collaboration, but also lives it through working with teams at other sites in the U.S. and around the world. John's research approach combines understanding users' needs through social science methods with designing and prototyping new technologies and learning from how they are used.

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