

Teaching the Ethics of Digital Research

Mel Stanfill

University of Central Florida
Orlando, FL, USA
mel.stanfill@ucf.edu

I frame the ethics of studying digital communities as having four competing aspects that may or may not be compatible: institutional rules such as the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process, which differ to at least some extent from institution to institution; our learned and culturally specific norms as researchers, which differ by discipline and by our own position in terms of nation, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, ability, and other factors; emerging popular norms about public and private in digital spaces, which differ in important ways from historical ones, but also have continuity; and corporate data practices and Terms of Service established by the the owners of the platforms in question. This raises questions about how we proceed when these different imperatives (perhaps inevitably) come into conflict with one another. I approach digital research ethics in particular as someone working toward teaching doctoral methods in a Digital Humanities-focused department against a background of an ongoing departmental conversation about whether there should be a distinct required ethics course in the program sequence. How can we, as teachers and directors of research, help our students navigate these sticky ethical questions when they are not settled even for researchers with much more experience?

One important site of conflict between these competing imperatives is when our professional norms as scholars don't align with what would be required of us to research ethically. There is an expectation, which we impart to our students, that our data should be verifiable and that we should not make any changes to it in order for our research to be valid. However, in cases where our data are online posts that could potentially be searched and therefore de-anonymized, academic standards of direct quotation and transparency of sources raise a risk of harm to the populations we study.[2] How we balance those competing demands on us as researchers is an important question to grapple with and to ask our students to grapple with.

A second point of tension comes when our academic values emphasizing free and open knowledge—and, for critical scholars, which turn our attention to the workings of power and inequality in institutions and platforms—are at odds with the Terms of Service on those platforms and the ways they often prohibit scraping their data or, more generally, broadly disallow “unauthorized use.”[3] How can we navigate these different frameworks simultaneously, and especially how can we help our students, who have little institutional protection should they be seen as running afoul of TOS as a contract? How is this further complicated by the larger

context of risk aversion on the part of many of our academic institutions and the ways university legal departments often take a narrower view of what is permissible than frameworks such as fair use?

Third, in the past few semesters I have begun to observe students (especially younger ones) taking hardline positions that everything on the internet is public and therefore fair game for any purpose, demonstrating the potentially growing gap between students' quotidian beliefs and how we have to proceed as researchers. boyd and Crawford made a vital intervention when they pointed out that “Just because a tweet is publicly accessible does not mean that it was meant to be consumed by just anyone” (p. 672), and this holds for other digital objects than Tweets and other cases than the Big Data focus of their article.[1] Thus, the fact that we can access data does not necessarily mean that we should do so, nor that it should be released publicly, and boyd and Crawford also call on researchers to consider differential power between researchers and users, the ways digital objects are created for a particular social context and not for researchers, and that the users in question would perhaps not agree to the use of their materials if they were contacted, which large-scale data collection can obscure. These are difficult questions to navigate in general, but become even more so when the values researchers themselves hold diverge from emerging best practices of research ethics. How can we help our students to address such mismatch in the classroom and their research as we are teaching them to “think like a researcher,” and how can we balance this with remaining open to interrogating our own habits and assumptions in light of broader social change?

I propose that, in engaging these issues in the classroom and in advising student research, faculty focus on getting students to explicitly articulate what potentials for harm may exist, how they are going to mitigate them, and why they feel that the work they are going to do carries an acceptable level of risk relative to the advancement of knowledge it can provide. These are, of course, the questions asked by the IRB process, but they can and should be asked independent of whether any given project is formally considered “human subjects research” that has to be put into the (notoriously problematic) IRB system. That is, it is our responsibility as researchers and teachers of research to protect the people we draw on for our studies, whether the university does or not. Importantly, this approach does not require saying categorically that certain research can't or shouldn't be done, nor that every project must be IRB approved, but rather it

insists that ethical questions are something students need to think carefully about each and every time as they research digital identities, practices, and communities, and provides an intellectual environment and scaffolding to enable them to do so.

REFERENCES

1. danah boyd and Kate Crawford. 2012. Critical questions for big data: Provocations for a cultural, technological and scholarly phenomenon. *Information, Communication & Society* 15, 5: 662–679. <http://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.678878>
2. Annette Markham. 2012. Fabrication as Ethical Practice. *Information, Communication & Society* 15, 3: 334–353. <http://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2011.641993>
3. Christian Sandvig and Karrie Karahalios. 2016. Most of what you do online is illegal. Let's end the absurdity. *The Guardian*. Retrieved July 21, 2016 from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jun/30/ctaa-online-law-illegal-discrimination>

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Mel Stanfill is an Assistant Professor of Texts and Technology and Digital Media at the University of Central Florida. Stanfill holds a PhD from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Stanfill's research interrogates the relationship between media industries and their audiences in the Internet era, and has appeared in venues such as *New Media and Society*, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, and *Selected Papers of Internet Research*.