

Social Media and Radiography Research: Ethical Considerations

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The use of social media and the available social media platforms continues to increase and equally the way individuals engage with this medium is extensive. Consequently, conducting research in this space offers new and creative ways of collecting and analysing data. Although not an exhaustive list, potential investigations include: the impact of social networks on perceived social support; how social media users gather and exchange health-related information and share personal experiences; the spread of misinformation about disease outbreaks to inform public health communication strategies; recruiting patients in clinical trials; the effect of social network media exposures on certain behaviours; the spread of public health-related information and the prevalence of certain behaviours¹. This offers opportunities for radiography-specific research as evidenced in recently published literature^{2,3}.

As a Doctoral candidate who is seeking to collect data through an on-line community, I (first author) have a particular interest in this field. Whereas the rules for traditional research data collection have evolved over time, the investigation of online spaces remains a new area for ethical consideration and subsequently the boundaries are not as clearly defined. Hence my time is spent discussing how this looks with the local Faculty Chair of Research Ethics (author two); an expert in engaging on-line communities in radiography (author three) and my doctorate supervisors. As the principal investigator it is my responsibility to ensure my work meets ethical standards however in this situation I find that as I drive the train I am working with these colleagues to lay the tracks.

There are of course documents to guide me on this quest. As outlined by the economic and social research council (ESRC)⁴ there are four areas of concern within social media research namely: private versus public posts; gaining informed consent; ensuring anonymity and risk

of harm. At the University of the West of England, Bristol this is extended into eight trigger topics with each setting out sub-divided with a list of trigger questions. These topics are: consideration of the place, platform and time; gaining informed consent; confidentiality; anonymity; protection of participants; data management/ storage security; protection of the researcher and copyright ⁵.

There is much to consider when assessing if on line data is private or public. Researchers may first consider if social media users have agreed to a platform's terms and conditions whereby there are clauses about how data can be used by third parties and researchers. For example in Twitter it is stated: *"By submitting, posting or displaying Content on or through the Services, you grant us a worldwide, non-exclusive, royalty-free license (with the right to sublicense) to use, copy, reproduce, process, adapt, modify, publish, transmit, display and distribute such Content in any and all media or distribution methods (now known or later developed). This license authorizes us to make your Content available to the rest of the world and to let others do the same"*⁶, However, how many social media users reading this editorial have read the terms and conditions of the platforms they use? And if you have not read these, has informed consent been achieved? Furthermore terms and conditions can change. Equally, how do we as researchers ensure that participants are fully informed about how their posts will be used- either at the moment in time or at a later date. Similarly the definition of what constitutes public and private data requires attention. In this instance, clarity is needed on whether the social media data has been gained from a private or public account and whether the platform user has a reasonable expectation of privacy based on where they have posted ⁷.

Let's look at this using a practical real-life example. For those of us who engage in micro-blogging activities such as tweet-chatting- have you considered how your data will be used? Is it clear in the tweet chat statement how your responses will be analysed, presented (direct quotes or themes) and where these may appear for example in research scoping exercises, publication or inclusion in national policy documents? Yes, there are professional guidance documents on operating in the on-line environment ^{8,9} however if you had this information would it change the way you interacted in the conversation? Of course this is in

some ways no different to covert observation in ethnographic research where letting people know they are being “observed” might result in altered behaviour¹⁰. This has the potential to affect the authenticity of the results. Moreover, in qualitative research it may be impossible to maintain a neat distinction between covert and overt research. Settings are often more complex and changeable than can be anticipated¹¹. The main point is to ensure research using social media and in on-line communities are discussed on a case by case basis with the local ethics committee and to document the outcome of such discussions, in all research outputs.

As social media technology and on-line communities continue to develop there is a number of exciting opportunities for radiography researchers to engage with novel data collection tools and research activities. From a research ethics perspective there is no particular barrier to deploying social media in research. However this needs to be balanced with the challenges of operating in this landscape. The eight trigger themes listed in this editorial are indicative of the topics that researchers intending to use social media may wish to consider. While it is outside the scope of this editorial to explore the questions linked to these themes in depth, the authors believe the eight themes listed should be addressed in any application for ethical approval for projects involving the use of social media in the research design. We urge our fellow radiography researchers to embrace this emerging field whilst giving it the due diligence they would with traditional data collection methods, to ensure both researcher and participants are protected which is, after all, the essence of sound ethical practice.

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