Ethical issues in the use of social networks as a field of research: public places or private rooms?

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Abstract. Ethical issues surrounding ethnographic research have long received special attention in academic debates. Such attention has increased in recent years, mainly due to tecnological advances, particularly the internet. The Web has expanded methodological possibilities in view of new research spaces, which add up-to-date problematics to the academic scenario. The post-modern trend of consuming, producing, and commercializing data and images, particularly in Western societies, has grown alongside the development of digital tecnologies and has broadened human predisposition to further exchanges not only of images and data, but also of emotions, beliefs, frustrations, successes, and ideologies. Such behaviour is especially clear in social network websites, whose users are encouraged to record their daily lives and to mediate experiences, perceptions, and meanings. This mixture of "real" and "virtual" results in even more complex limits separating what is public from what is private, and offers important consequences for research studies that focus on on-line environments, given the fact that the methods and guidelines used to regulate ethical issues have undergone changes so as to adjust to digital environments. This feature further complicates decision-making processes in research and increases differences in researchers' opinions regarding their ethical standards. This paper offers some ideas on ethical issues that have come forward while writing my PhD thesis, whose topic is the construction and becoming of non-heteronormative on-line identities in social network websites. Discussing topics such as sexuality and gender requires, because of their very nature, special attention to research data. When such discussions take place in on-line environments, however, they require extra care, because, even though social network profiles are semi-public spaces, they do not necessarily belong to the public domain. This is the point where problems begin, given the difficulty of distinguishing what is public from what is private in such environments. This paper presents my alternatives to solving these issues and states that setting ethical parameters in research studies carried out in digital environments is both important and useful, but should not be restrictive. The reason for this is that the internet makes it more difficult to establish clear and predefined norms because fluidity and decentralization deter unyielding methods.

Keywords. social networks, privacy, ethical dilemmas

1. Introduction

The ethical issues involved in ethnographic investigations have always received special attention in academic debates, but in recent years, as technological advancements have

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expanded methodological possibilities regarding the emergence of new areas for research, other issues and ethical dilemmas have been added to these discussions.

The postmodern tendency to consume, produce and commercialise data and images – above all in Western society – has intensified along with the development of digital technology. Meanwhile, the human predisposition towards exchange – not only of images and information, but of emotions, beliefs, frustrations, successes and ideologies – has been stimulated. This behaviour is especially apparent in social networks, where people are encouraged to document their everyday lives and mediate experiences, perceptions and meanings.

The mix between 'real' and 'virtual'4 confuses the boundaries between public and private sectors even further and this has important consequences for all research carried out in the digital sector, since the methods and guidelines that govern ethical aspects have to be reassessed to fit the online environment. This complicates decision-making in research and exacerbates the differences in opinion between researchers as regards their ethical positions.

My intention in this article is to present some reflections about the ethical questions which have arisen during the development of my doctoral thesis in which I propose to study the construction and future of non-heteronormative digital identities in online social networks. Working with themes of sexuality and gender naturally requires that special care be taken with research data. But in the online environment this care must be multiplied, because although online community profiles are semi-public spaces, that does not mean they are in the public domain. This is where the problems start, because it is not easy to distinguish what is public and what is considered a private environment in the social networking websites. I also explain the solutions I have adopted to counter these problems and argue that while it is both important and useful to establish ethical parameters in online investigations, these should not be restrictive since it is more difficult to establish clear, predefined rules on the internet once fluency and decentralization impede inflexible methods.

2. Research context

The focus of the research is to analyse the construction of digital identities and the way in which non-heteronormative genders and sexualities express themselves through technological mediation and the exchange of cultural repertories in social networks. The questions that guide me are: How do non-heteronormative genders and sexualities register themselves in representations mediated by technological devices? Which practices and modes of subjectivity are considered by subjects for the construction of a

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[4] The term 'virtual' is used sparingly in this research as it is a concept that can be understood incorrectly. In the most common, everyday sense of the word it is understood as something that exists, but not physically. It is not something palpable, but rather a simulation of something that already exists. Hence the recurrent use of the term when we refer to what we do on the internet, like simulating events or establishing social relations independent of physical contact. Gilles Deleuze (2006) brought further meanings to the concept. He suggests that you cannot confuse the 'virtual' with the 'possible'. For him, what is possible is already formed; it is already a realisation and only lacks its existence, while what is virtual "is not opposed to what is real, but, on the contrary, possesses its own full reality" (2006: 199). Thus, for Deleuze, what is virtual is not contrary to what is real, but to what is current, and manifests itself as tendencies; it is not ready, but rather in development, and therefore in movement. In this study, the sense given to the concept of what is virtual is not something imaginary; it is something that is deterrortorialised, which depends on the physical means to materialise, yet is free of the classical concepts of time and space.

digital identity that does not ascribe to the prevalent standards in our social structure? In this way, I investigate both how the processes of subjectification shape gender and non-heteronormative sexuality, as well as the participation, interaction and negotiation of meaning towards the elaboration of online identities and their exchanges in the context of social networks.

I undertake this research from the perspective of social constructionism, finding support in the ideas of queer theory and feminism to aid me in reflecting on the daily practices of subjects. From this viewpoint I assume that digital identity is a social construct, elaborated by way of subjective practices and exchanges established online. And, in that sense, the focus of attention is on the users' experiences of existing and moving within social networks, and the ways in which language is organised to build the stories and discourses by which meanings are negotiated.

To develop the project I decided not to focus on a community or specific group and opted instead to create, in January 2010, a multi-sited network – a network of networks – in various Web 2.0 sites. This network is called Desobedientes and it consists of a main website, a personal profile and fan page on Facebook, a Twitter profile, another in Tumblr, and a YouTube channel. The central idea was to develop an identity by means of the same technological devices and practices as those I have proposed to study.

There are various reasons which justify my opting for the multi-sited network. One of these is to understand the dynamic of identity construction from diverse angles, since people find different ways of inhabiting these places, influenced by the characteristics and technical structure of each individual network. Also, the measures people take to construct their identities in the environments where they interact and socialise vary according to the digital context in which they are carried out. Another reason is related to fluidity and movement. Instead of beginning in one environment and passing to another, I prefer to work in a coordinated way, moving from one site to another and experimenting with the different tools available in each environment.

Finally, the objective is strategic, stemming from my intention to act in accordance with the characteristics of each community. As I have stated, each network has its own technical specialities which inform the actions of its users. These specialities depend on the network's specific resources, the services it offers, and its intentions, which differ according to the type of public it wishes to attract. Twitter for example, due to its connection with the immediate, creates an environment more conducive to bringing together multitudes for the exchanging of information. The purpose behind maintaining a profile on this network is to promote and publicise Desobedientes and, above all, to obtain updated information quickly – something that becomes possible once the mutual relationship of 'follower-followed' facilitates the filtering of themes that are interesting for the research.

In YouTube, the intention is to share audio-visual productions, as well as observing how the exchanged videos and the subsequently generated comments gain visibility. It is then possible to see what effects they produce and how they facilitate socialisation and group interests around non-heteronormative identities, without suffering censorship from the mainstream media. The usefulness of Tumblr is in sharing images simply and rapidly, and it is a site with low levels of censorship and restriction. Facebook attracts more users than any social network in the world, and for this reason it is the site in which my observations and actions are most concentrated. However, its closed nature and excessive policies of control and censorship mean that many themes are unable to be developed or discussed there.

Hence the need to maintain a central platform (desobedientes.net) which, in addition to fulfilling the role of presenting details and indicating the investigation processes, also serves to establish relationships of trust. It also allows for the development of discussions that cannot be opened on other platforms due to their possible infringement on the rules structuring those spaces. By buying and managing a URL[5], I acquire the right to more autonomy in content and data management. The construction of this site also seeks to incorporate the suggestion made by Kozinets (2010, 140) when he defends the importance of providing a channel via which research subjects can get in touch to offer opinions or receive more information about the project. By this token the channel is used to present my research findings to the individuals involved in its processes.

This multi-site network that constitutes my field of study has permitted me to act from different focuses and social contexts, gathering a multitude of people who share the same interest in non-heteronormative genders and sexualities. The analyses are structured according to the choices of users: that is, the ways they use technological tools to construct, present, communicate, make contacts and establish links. The challenge is to make sense of this fragmentation: to make connections between facts and stories without a beginning, middle or an end, without indexes or chapters, and which cross and recross over the social networks, forming narratives that tend towards the pluralistic and diverse.

Methods of observation and interaction are via the use of multiple tools, which are used in accordance with the context: online interviews (via video chat, text chat or messaging services), virtual events (a tool that permits the gathering of a group of people to discuss specific themes), conversations and real-time interactions, among other means. It is important to note that these tools do not have to be used in a specific order or in a particular way; they can even be used simultaneously or in coordination.

Desobedientes is made up of a complex network of interactions and practices, mediated by technologies. Today it has over ten thousand members. This system has allowed me to construct a pluralistic vision for understanding what I propose to study and it has enabled me to move within these spaces. It has also obliged me to confront limitations in decision making, with regards where and how to focus the actions in non-specific geographic contexts[6]. Obviously, this creates complications as regards terms of access, visibility and privacy, and calls for an acknowledgment of ethical and institutional boundaries and an assurance that precautions be taken with the research data.

The ability of both researcher and research subjects to assume anonymous identities or pseudonyms; the complex processes for obtaining informed consent; the illusion that on the internet it is possible to preserve intimacy; and the blurred boundaries between what is public and what is private all combine to enhance the complexity of the interpretations and behaviours to be stipulated. Eysenbach and Till (2004, 1105) point out that making a distinction between what is public and what is private is one of the most difficult and important tasks for research carried out within the social networking environment; notwithstanding, it is formative in the definition of processes. To follow, I describe the guidelines that provide the frame through which I consider these questions and structure the ethical parameters guiding the research.

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[5] The acronym URL stands for Universal Resource Locator and refers to the method with which the Web identifies and locates any type of file or resource, wherever it may be in the world.
[6] In *Desobedientes*, the only impediment was language, since the network was constructed for a Spanish-speaking public.

3. The ethical guidelines which steer my actions in the Desobedientes network

I believe that the principal objective of any piece of research is to build knowledge for the benefit of society and, for that reason, it should not cause harm to the subjects involved in its processes – without whom the research would be impossible to carry out. To perform research within a digital environment adds another obvious, yet very important issue: it must not be forgotten that data is provided by real people, not a computer. Therefore, decisions are considered in relation to these people, ensuring that the results do not harm anyone.

Some collectives and individual initiatives look to shed light on the realm of digital research. One of these is the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR)[7], an international organization founded in 1999 by a group of investigators dedicated to advancing transdisciplinary studies on the internet. They carry out annual conferences in order to promote online discussion, reflection and collaboration. The central focus of their concerns is with ethical questions in internet research and, in 2002, they created a guide entitled *Ethical Decision-making and Internet Research Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee*[8], which serves as the primary source of reference for many researchers. In 2012 they published the report: *Ethical decision-making and Internet research 2.0: Recommendations from the AoIR ethics working committee*[9], in which the authors propose some guidelines on the taking of ethical decisions in research based on Web 2.0 devices.

Adolfo Estalella and Elisenda Ardèvol (2007) form part of a group of researchers who argue that the distinction between what is public and what is private has become one of the key elements in guiding ethical decisions. Therefore, they state, the level of responsibility of the researcher in relation to the data they find available online must be established based upon that distinction. The authors remind us that private data refers to that which requires permission for use, just as with investigations carried out in a face-to-face environment. They also maintain that research subjects should be informed about the objectives and intentions of said research – since rules for research carried out online are no different – and that it is important to follow the basic principles which determine what can or cannot be collected without asking permission.

Other authors signal the need for research carried out in Web 2.0 to be sensitive to context, with its ethical procedures structured so that their principles and categories are useful and meet all the guidelines in the ethnographic research (Snee 2008), while not becoming restrictive to the point at which the research becomes invalid.

In order to establish ethical guidelines, I have sought to follow all these recommendations, as well as the suggestions made by Kozinets, who in the book *Netnography: doing Ethnographic Research Online* indicates some ethical principles for netnography: (1) the investigator should reveal his or her identity and intentions to the members of the online community; (2) he/she should ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of subjects; (3) he/she should obtain consent when necessary, and, (4) properly credit a community member when quoting them and attain their permission before using specific information. (Kozinets 2010, 140).

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[7] More information: http://aoir.org/.
[8] Authors: ESS, C. and the Ethics Working Committee (AoIR), produced in 2002. Available at: http://www.aoir.org/reports/ethics.pdf
[9] Authors: Annette Markham and Buchanan Elizabeth, with the collaboration of the Ethics Working Committee (AoIR), produced in August, 2012. Available at www.aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf

In practice, the focus of recommendations made by researchers working in a digital environment follows the same principles as with traditional ethnographies, such as: respect for research subjects, data security and the privacy of individuals. Nonetheless, these fundamental principles become complicated when managed in the social networks, because it is not easy to answer questions such as: What are the appropriate strategies for protecting research subjects? Can information available in user profiles with no security restrictions be considered public in social networks? What kind of internet interactions are public and do not require informed consent? What types of records can be made without the need for requesting consent? What kind of information can cause harm in the life of a non-hetereonormative person who is not publically out of the closet (even if in their profile their non-normative sexual orientation is made clear)?

The fact is that Web 2.0 social networks blur the barriers which differentiate public from private and thus complicate ethical decision-making. Moreover, the divergence of researchers' opinions does not help make the context any less blurred, since there are those who argue that data found on the Web 2.0 without access restriction should be considered as being in the public domain and that there are therefore no ethical problems with collecting and analysing it. However, my conscience dictates that even though this data is publically available, it does not mean I can use it without criteria as part of the research process, especially since many social network users are unaware of the need to ensure a degree of privacy in their profiles. Many users do not read the "terms and conditions" or know how to use the tools that restrict access to their information.

As a result of these concerns, I decided to position myself from a contextual perspective, based on the recommendations of the AoIR. They suggest thinking of ethical decisions not as formulas but as guidelines which respect – and are sensitive to – context, their argument being that there are often actions which are defensible for specific dilemmas or problems in internet research, and in which "ambiguity, uncertainty, and disagreement are inevitable":

> In this light, it is a mistake to view our recommendations as providing general principles that can be applied without difficulty or ambiguity to a specific ethical problem so as to algorithmically deduce the correct answer. (Ess 2002, 4)

In order to establish the ethical guidelines, my main concern has been to protect the subject under research, particularly as regards their profile. To this end, all care has been taken to ensure that recorded data does not reveal the subject's identity or cause him/her harm in the future. Moreover, I opted to make my own identity public and provide clear, visible information regarding the objectives of the project in order to establish a relationship of honesty and trust between myself and the members of *Desobedientes*. Thus, in the description of the profiles that make up the network, I explain that it is part of a piece of academic research, and I explain my intentions so that everyone is aware they are taking part in a research project. In this description I introduce myself and assume responsibility for safeguarding personal data, keeping subjects anonymous and, in the case of images, asking subjects their permission before use. This is the text that accompanies all the profiles in the *Desobedientes* network:

> Hello everyone!
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> My name is Carla de Abreu and I'm a PhD student at the University of Barcelona. This profile is part of my thesis project which proposes to consider the construction of non-heteronormative gender and sexual identities in digital social networks, through the lens of visual-culture studies and Queer theory.
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> I am very interested in knowing more about the everyday subjectivity practices of subjects who disobey the heteronormative rules of online social networks. In these spaces, everyone can experiment with many ways of developing the 'I', and this creates opportunities for the construction of other femininities and masculinities. I believe that the information I am trying to gather can help those who are interested in understanding how non-heteronormative genders and sexualities live, and are perceived, on the internet.
>
> I guarantee that all collected data (comments, debates, images) will be totally confidential, and, if quoted, will be credited with a pseudonym so you will always remain anonymous. Permission will be asked before using your images in the published research.
>
> I would be happy to share my findings with you. If you are interested, please send me an email. Likewise, if you have any questions regarding the investigation, please feel free to write to me: carlaluzia@gmail.com.

Thus, the community members are aware of my intentions. What I hope is that everyone reads my description upon becoming a member of the network. By choosing to reveal my identity and explain the research objectives, I have, of course, lost many opportunities to establish interactions and collect data that could be important in the analysis process. However, omitting my intentions would not seem to me to have been an honest approach.

In this research, images of online identities and photos from personal albums have been considered private data and thus requiring consent for use; as have individual interviews, emails and private messages. Fragments of texts, upon which I build my inquiries and reflections, count as public information once individuals who pass through the *Desobedientes* network are aware that they are in an academic research environment. However, at all times the proper analytical approach has been used in understanding the contextual nature of each text and recognising when it contained something personal and not suitable for use, thereby ensuring that people's privacy was not put at risk or the established bond of trust broken.

Attaining informed consent has involved a variety of processes in different contexts, demanding differing strategies. However, my main means of gaining permission has stemmed from my coexistence with subjects on the network and the exchanges I have engaged in with them in order to offer further explanations regarding the project and my intentions. As a result, permission has been given via many methods, bearing in mind that "informed consent does not necessarily imply or require a particular written or signed form. It is the quality of the consent, not the format, that is relevant" (AAA 2009, 3). In all cases, it has been important to explain the details of the investigation, as well as the ways in which the data is to be used in the thesis. Another decision that I consider important has been to offer a form of direct contact – as a commitment to keeping everyone informed about the progress of the research and clearing up any doubts that might arise – via the website constructed for this purpose.

The values underlying the ethical principles of this research project are made clear from the start and I am aware that this imposes limits that cannot then be disregarded. Nonetheless, I believe this has been a successful strategy, allowing me to move through different contexts with a certain degree of flexibility, while freely exhibiting the principles I have adopted. These principles are based on a willingness to share experiences and opinions with the individuals who form part of *Desobedientes* and who have collaborated voluntarily to help build knowledge, and they are also based on respect for the privacy, intimacy and autonomy of everyone.

4. Final notes

To define what is public or private in the social networks is complex and there is probably no way of establishing general ethical guidelines which serve for all forms of research, since each project has its own specificities and nebulous areas. Furthermore, ambiguity and uncertainty are an inherent part of the research process in a digital environment.

It must be emphasized that my choosing to reveal my identity and intentions comes from my understanding that individuals who have formed part of the processes and collaborated with the analysis have the right to know they are taking part in a piece of research, and therefore also have the right not to participate or to request that their data not be collected. To comply with this decision I have made a commitment to transparency. This commitment implies a responsibility to research subjects – the principal sources of reference for the research. I think that rather than making me vulnerable, this decision has in fact strengthened my identity in the field of study and opened up other opportunities which might not have been possible had I kept my identity and objectives secret.

This positioning in the investigation stems from the idea that the researcher should not take the role of 'data-thirsty vampire', but instead be prepared to offer and give, as in the sense of mutuality proposed by Forte: "courtesy can be the basis for reciprocity, for example, even in the absence of palpable amiability." (2004: 230) In this regard, I can say that courtesy and mutuality are entirely consistent with the constructionist perspective that guides my positioning in this thesis; a positioning which understands that mutual exchange, reciprocity and collaboration are the cornerstones upon which we build knowledge.

The fact is that the contextual nature of the technologies and the fluidity and complexity of the 2.0 tools create situations which change rapidly, making *a priori* strategies an impossibility. As a result, the ethical decisions in this investigation have been constantly readjusted to fit the diverse contexts which make up the *Desobedientes* network. There has been no single formula or recipe. What there has been is a search for more flexible processes to suit different circumstances, influenced by the practices and exchanges of the users.

In this article I have sought to outline the main considerations that have arisen regarding the ethical dilemmas that I have encountered during my experience in the field of study. It has not been my intention to offer a guide to ethical conduct in research studies which use the same types of devices. Rather, my objective has been to explain the conflicts I have faced; to highlight the importance of ethical decisions in social network-based research; and to describe the choices I have made, whether they have been right or wrong.

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