Social Media Research Ethics: Power & Provocations

Transcript of the Roundtable Discussion on 26 March 2021

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Social Media Research Ethics: Power and Provocations[1]

EVH: Good morning everyone. We'll get started very shortly. We'll just allow another moment for everybody to join the call.

Hello everyone, and welcome. Thank you for being here on a late-March Friday, we really appreciate it. We're convening today for a roundtable discussion on the topic of social media research ethics: power and provocations.

My name is Emily Van Haren, my pronouns are she/her, and I'm a research associate and graduate student resident with the Sherman Center for Digital Scholarship, which runs this *Do More with Digital Scholarship* workshop series. A friendly reminder that today's conversation is being recorded for later viewing, and you will be able to access the link to that recording, as well as other recordings in the *Do More with Digital Scholarship* series, from the Sherman Centre website under the "Events" tab.

Please also note that live captions are enabled for this session and you can show or hide those using the button at the bottom of your screen.

I'm just going to pause for a moment to make sure—it sounds like some folks are having trouble accessing the meeting, so we'll pause for another moment to make sure everybody can enter the call. Okay, sounds like everybody is here and able to join us.

So, speaking as part of our organizer and panelist team, I recognize that as members of the McMaster University and Brock University communities, we work and study on the traditional territory shared between the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and the Anishinaabe nations, which is acknowledged in the Dish with One Spoon wampum. This wampum uses the symbolism of a dish to represent the territory, and one spoon to represent that the people are to share the resources of this land and take only what they need.

This land acknowledgement, and today's conversations about what it means to engage ethically, are also part of our commitments to challenging settler colonial and racial violence, in ways that emphasize social media as digital-material sites of ongoing harm and resistance.

Before I introduce our panelists, I'd like to offer a bit of backstory for this Roundtable. This conversation is the third component of a trio of modules we've developed on the topic of social media research ethics. And when I say we, I'd like to thank the team I've worked with over the

[1] This transcript has been lightly edited for reading clarity, and the panelists have added notes and references where appropriate. To support future offerings related to social media research ethics, please consider contacting the Sherman Centre at scds@mcmaster.ca to tell us how you've used this document in your research, teaching, and learning.

last two terms, including Sherman Center Academic Director Andrea Zeffiro, who's joining us as a panelist today, Research Data Management Specialist Isaac Pratt, and the Sherman Centre's Administrative Director, Jay Brodeur.

Working alongside and learning from this team has really highlighted for me the Sherman Centre's evolving and ongoing approach to social media research methodologies and ethics, which is always in conversation with different disciplinary approaches, different types of projects that have passed through the Centre, and the knowledge and technical skill sets of information professionals from across the university. So I've really felt my work and my thinking greatly enriched by being a part of that integrated approach, and I'd encourage you, if you haven't already, to check out those modules one and two, which you can find on the Sherman Center website.[2]

And I mention those two earlier modules to emphasize that our goal with this trio has been to offer some actionable starting points for social media based research projects, but without glossing over the ethical complexities of this topic. So this Roundtable conversation today will identify some of those complexities, while also widening our perspective and prompting a more reflexive look at the terms of the conversation we're holding.

So: what does it mean to frame social media research in terms of ethics? How is power at work in the ways we frame and approach and engage with social media as researchers and users? And also: what does a reflection on these questions provoke in us—what does it compel us to define or do differently in our research?

These kinds of questions will resonate differently with different disciplinary approaches, different topics or platforms of study, and so on. But they also speak to the need for an extended and multi-disciplinary conversation about social media research ethics. We're very fortunate to be joined by scholars whose considerations of this topic stretch across research agendas and multiple platforms and context of research—and also just different life experiences of social media, of living our lives with various digital habits and communities and devices, and linking that everydayness to our critical inquiries.

On that note, I am delighted to introduce our panelists, beginning with Theresa Kenney. Theresa is a PhD candidate in the Department of English and Cultural Studies. Her research explores asexual, aromantic and platonic intimacies within queer Asian North America. She has recently published an article about Tumblr, asexuality, cake, and Pilipinx relationality in the diaspora (Kenney, 2020). In addition to her studies Theresa is a Sherman Centre graduate resident, an organizer of anti-racism events and coalitions, and an active social media user. Welcome Theresa.

[2] The Sherman Centre website is https://scds.ca. Materials from the Social Media Research Ethics modules are available at https://scds.github.io/sm-research-ethics/.

Dr. Karen Louise Smith is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication, Popular Culture and Film at Brock University. Her research explores the tensions between openness, privacy and participation in technologically mediated culture. Dr. Smith is currently a collaborator on the eQuality project, which is a seven year SSHRC Partnership Grant examining issues like privacy and cyberbullying in the lives of young people.

Dr. Andrea Zeffiro is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies and Multimedia, and Academic Director for the Sherman Centre for Digital Scholarship. Some of her research into data cultures has examined the politics of data visualization, social media data ethics, data futurity, and the invisibility of human labor in the Google Books project. Her digital storytelling work on e-waste is listed in DH reference guides at Loyola University, Northwestern University, and Virginia Tech.

And Dr. Sarah Brophy is a professor in the Department of English and Cultural Studies. She is the author of *Witnessing AIDS: Writing, Testimony, and the Work of Mourning*. She is also coeditor, with Janice Hladki, of *Embodied Politics in Visual Autobiography*, and contributor to *PMLA*, *Literature and Medicine*, *Contemporary Women's Writing, Auto/Biography Studies*, *Cultural Critique,* and *Feminist Media Studies*. Her current SSHRC-funded research examines visual self-portraiture, installation art, digital labor, and activism.

So thank you to Sarah, Karen, Theresa and Andrea, for joining us today and for your well-timed introductory arrivals on our screens. Thank you.

One final note, just before we get started, is to alert everyone to the format of our remaining time. This roundtable is scheduled for 90 minutes, and the conversation with panelists will be structured around four questions. At approximately 11:10 we'll wrap up the panelists' discussion. And then we'd like to hear from you all with any questions or comments for our panelists. So I just asked that you save those remarks for that final stretch, and then use the chat function at that time to communicate.

Question One

EVS: Without further ado, panelists: welcome again. And I'd like to begin by getting your sense of some of the definitional complexities of the term "ethics" as an approach to social media research. How is our understanding of what ethical research is or what it entails shaped by policies, protocols, or the assumptions of various institutional perspectives? Maybe that's the university, the social media service provider, legislation, or so on. So how have some of your research experiences alerted you to the tensions or challenges within that definition?

Karen, would you like to get us started?

KLS: Thank you so much for the invitation today. I'm so happy to be here.

In response to that question, I think for many of us who are situated in universities, one of the starting points to research ethics is the idea that you have to apply for ethics, or that you need to go through a process to ensure that your research is going to be ethical.

So I, like many others, begin with some of the language and the rhetoric and the discourse that's a part of documents like the Tri-council Policy Statement [2] (Canada, 2018).

I've also spent a lot of time looking at what the Association of Internet Researchers (see franzke, Bechmann, Zimmer & Ess, 2020) has to say about ethics, because a lot of my work involves digital media, and people who are interacting and engaging and creating community through digital media.

But as a scholar I try to take a step back from all of that. And, for me, the reason I'm interested in what happens on the Internet and what happens on social media in the first place, is that I care about democracy. I care about justice. I care about people experiencing their rights. And those issues are a lot bigger than a lot of the finer points in policy documents about research ethics.

But when I'm embarking on a project, I really try to think about the big picture and what it's contributing to in the world. And for me that's part of an ethics conversation: to think about all kinds of issues of social justice, of democracy, of participation. And to think about how my project factors into all of that. And it's hard to boil down to a checklist, or to fit in all of the fields of an ethics application.

But I quite often find myself explaining that I'm taking an empowerment-oriented epistemology, or I'm taking a participatory approach to my research. Those are theoretical and methodological words that I use to connect the processes and the forms that exist in institutions, to what I see as important and valuable and aspirational in terms of the work that I'm doing. So the dots get connected in very complicated ways, but I think that's a good start to trying to explain my approach and how I piece those things together.

EVH: Thank you, Karen. Andrea, would you like to join in?

AZ: Sure. Thanks so much, Karen. I think I have some intersecting points to make to yours.

Generally speaking, my response to this question probably started to take shape about seven or eight years ago, when I noticed how conversations, particularly in academic spaces about research using social media, centered on how the unprecedented access to user data made available through social networking sites positioned service providers as lucrative sites for research. And there was—I mean there still is—an excitement and enthusiasm about the

possibilities for user data to inform our understanding about people's attitudes and sentiments regarding current events and issues.

At the same time, positioning social media platforms as kind of like these neutral data portals felt too compliant with the ways in which platforms were positioning their services to scholarly communities.

And I wondered if, in some ways, we—the research communities “we”—were inadvertently relying on these commercial providers to dictate how one goes about doing social media research. And most obviously this is true for how social media platforms dictate how data is made available to researchers through their API.

But from my vantage point accessing data through the API is one of many crucial considerations for social media research. It's not the only way to do research. And I wanted to productively trouble some of the assumptions that were being made about social media research data specifically. For instance, could we broaden our understanding about a data corpus to include considerations about the data bodies or human subjects laboring to produce this research data?

I started to think about data ethics, as a critical space for researchers to challenge the evolving norms of social media research. What I didn't want to do was to come up with a checklist, as Karen referenced, or a “plug-and-play” model for ethics. And I borrow that terminology, “plug-and-play,” from computing to mean something that's automatic and that doesn't require configuration. In fact I wanted to be able to demonstrate the complete opposite: how social media research necessitates ongoing ethical configurations.

I also borrowed conceptually from Alexis Shotwell’s (2016) work, in that I wanted to engage with ethical entanglements against purity politics. I wasn't interested in resolving ambiguities because I wanted to learn from the uncertainties and tensions.

In the end, I conceptualize data ethics, in the context of social media research, as the interplay of relationships of power.

Social media platforms or service providers are effectively gatekeepers that also become partners in research, by virtue of being the access point to data. This partnership is complicated by the fact that social media platforms engaged in this mass collection of data for profit. That's a really unsophisticated way of describing their business model, but that's in part how we're complicit or implicated in this partnership.

We might also consider how platforms have scripted for us new norms about, for instance, publicness or sharing. There's an assumption about how social media encourage us to share, but—as scholars, like Wendy Chun (2006), Clare Birchall (2016) or Alexander Galloway (2006)

would argue, sharing is protocological. We have to share information and our data as a precondition for participation.

There's that dynamic to consider, as well as the ways that platforms tend to conceal more than they reveal. We're only ever really given a teeny tiny glimpse into their internal operation. And I don't mean just the organizational structure but also all of those back-end activities. Everything that happens before it's displayed to us through the interface.

These are only a few of the factors that are part of this evolving, complex research partnership.

To add another layer, we can think of how, over the last three years in particular, ethics has also been co-opted by the tech industry. We hear these terms like “data ethics,” “ethical AI”. Because ethics has become a buzzword, I think there's more at stake now when we talk about “ethics,” especially in these kinds of contexts. And I think this is why it's so crucial to continue to stress the complexities and complicities of knowledge production in its entirety.

So all of those processes and practices are involved in representing the world, as well as the sometimes fraught role that academic research and scholars, ourselves, play in negotiating this interplay of relationships with power.

EVH: Thank you so much, Andrea. Theresa, did you want to jump in here?

TK: I feel like Karen and Andrea have set up the things that I've been thinking about.

So lately I've been thinking about ethics in terms of relationality, accountability and reciprocity.

Because often ethics is framed through this idea of ethics boards, the university—things that we have to apply for. Which is great: it directs our analysis and it makes sure that we are ethical, based on a certain checklist of models for doing research. And in social media research that’s totally important.

But I've been thinking about how these institutions are often inherently harmful themselves. The university is something that is trapped within settler colonial, capitalist, neoliberal ways of doing things. There are things about platforms themselves as trapped within capitalist ways of exploiting. And I mean that from everything from the mineral extraction that fuels our laptops, to the actual participation on these platforms.

I'm trying to think through how to be ethical when we're thinking about institutions like ethics boards, and platforms, as always already mixed into these power structures. So I'm thinking about: what does it mean to be bound up in these?

And my solution, so far, has been thinking through queer of colour critique (Ferguson, 2018). Specifically moving away from those *models of ethics*, towards *modes of being ethical*—which seems like a small nuance, but I think there's something important about naming how those one-size-fits-all checklists don't work as modes of being ethical.

So I'm thinking about what it means to be online, and ways of being in general, in regards to ethics. And for me that has to do with accountability: being accountable to the communities that we're doing research on, thinking about the participants who are on those platforms, and in a way de-centering the practices and institutions that partake in the harm—[harms] that are clear, these platforms are clearly engaging with harmful practices or histories.

And I've been thinking, particularly this past week about what that means. Because, based off last week's events in Atlanta, I've been thinking about the complicated ethics, in my case, of doing research on queer Asian folks online.

These platforms are spaces where obviously our pain and resistance and anger are all kind of shooting out. You can log on to Twitter and see that still happening after last Tuesday. I'm trying to think through the ethics of: well, these platforms are already shadowbanning, or regulating, or policing, or censoring these expressions. What does it mean as a researcher to think about how these participants are worthy of thinking through and analyzing and being in relation with? In the context of what happened offline, and also what happens online in response.

So, these are *modes*, they're not models of approaching these kinds of situations, which I think is the move that I would like digital ethics to start thinking through: not falling to the traditional ethics models, and being more in relation with the participants that we're thinking with.

EVH: Thank you so much, Theresa. And Sarah?

SB: Thanks so much everyone. I've already learned a lot from everyone's remarks and I think the thread of complexity and implicatedness is really, really important for us to think about.

I think that I can add to that a perspective from visual culture research. My research concentrates on visual digital interfaces and forms of self-representation and self-portraiture. So I'm really interested in both everyday or vernacular practices of digital photography and composition, and also in forms of artistic cultural production in online spaces—and often in the meeting point between the two, for example in crowdsourced projects.

I think the visual maybe gets glossed over in some of our discussions of social media research ethics. One way in which I've started to think about this is to consider that, as a researcher in these domains, I'm always already a "produser," I'm always already implicated and immersed in what I'm studying, even from the moment of coming to be interested in the subject and in tracking the kind of production that's happening.

And so I'm really interested in dynamics of lurking and questions of screenshot ethics. Screenshots are something we do very automatically and casually, but what does it mean to grab this material and create an image of an image? How do we store that? How do we then potentially share and reproduce that in our work? There's a lot of ethical complexity to how we handle that kind of interaction.

So some models that have been helpful for me, theoretically and in terms of praxis, include some work coming out of feminist media studies, particularly Zarzycka and Olivieri's (2017) idea of "affective encounters": that, in engaging with digital media, we're always already in this space of affective encounters that are also political, and entail accountability and responsibility.

I also take up the framework of "automedia" in my research. And here I'm influenced by Julie Rak (2015), and by Ümit Kennedy and Emma Maguire (2018), in understanding automedial texts and platforms as sites of self-inscription. Automedia is a way of describing the complexity of self-representation in social media contexts, but it's also a way of describing a method of engagement or encounter that entails, again, responsibility, but also a certain degree of self-reflexivity and self-inscription on the part of the researcher, to try to track and become accountable and transparent about the work that we're engaging in (Rak, 2015, pp. 155-6).

So I'm happy to talk more about that as we go along, but for now I just wanted to say thank you for a great start to the conversation and also a shout out to some students in the current audience. It's great to see everyone here.

Question Two

EVH: Thank you everyone. I think those points about the researcher's always already multiple roles and entanglements are such a crucial place to begin. And I think it brings us to a second question, which is about the subjects and communities with which a social media researcher is always interacting in one sense or another. I'm wondering how your research trajectories have perhaps helped you to think about social media and social media research as complex scenes of encounter? How have you been thinking about or theorizing those kinds of encounters, and with what implications for our understanding of ethical practices?

Theresa, would you like to get us started?

TK: Sure. I would say that most of my digital research has shown me and continues to show me that ethics was always about encounter. I think Sarah did a great job of explaining what that encounter looks like: of being not only the researcher but, in my case, I'm part of these communities. And I am an active social media—I'm thinking about how I'm implicated particularly within my communities online.

But my research keeps showing me that that research is contingent (Huang and Lee, 2020) in itself on the communities that are producing online, and that I am encountering with on a daily basis—through particularly their cultural production.

I feel like there's often a conversation that's happening in my communities online, but often it's the actual discourse or the … In the case of the article that was mentioned in my bio, I was thinking about art that was being produced in my online communities, and using that as the jumping off point to think through my research.

I think that, again, ethical models (versus ethical modes), don't always think about those contingencies, especially in online networks. I'm interested in the way that that's a messy contingency, that there are ways that I am implicated, but also encountering new things, almost every day in my communities, which means that I have to place importance on relation, which I think, hopefully, troubles those traditional models of anonymizing or setting boundaries between our communities.

And I think that's a move towards looking at platforms rather than the people, or looking at cultural objects rather than the people, while also explicitly naming our relation to those users, and those groups on social media.

And one of the things that I kind of reiterate to myself is that if the project can't be in good relation—if it can't think through the relation with my communities, and do it in reciprocity, in a way that is accountable to them—then perhaps it's not a project that I should be engaging with. What does it mean for me to drop a project that does not hold up its ethical responsibilities to the communities that I'm working with? What if the participants or the platform say no?

I think sometimes as researchers we go: “Oh, I still want to do the project! It's such a good idea!” But I'm trying to think through “encounter” as also recognizing that maybe it's just [that]: encounter. Maybe I'm not meant to analyze it.

So: [that’s] the long way of saying ethics is all about encounter.

EVH: Thank you. Sarah, did you want to speak some more to these encounters in your work?

SB: Absolutely. Theresa, that was such a great way to understand the process of continual reassessment of your relationship to research, and also community embeddedness.

So I'll try to build on that, from the perspective of some of the work that I've been doing. My current work has been investigating how feminist/queer/crip/mad visual artists’ self-portraiture projects manifest in online spaces, in and through visitor and user social media engagements. I say “visitor” because partly I'm looking at installations that are using a crowdsourced approach

to build a kind of web extension. And that is a pre-pandemic phenomenon that perhaps will return in different forms.

So, I've partly been looking at what's entailed in accessing and responsibly engaging with crowdsourced, vernacular digital archives. And arguably, as Anna Poletti (2020) points out, these kinds of projects could be considered a form of "collective autobiography" (p. 79), where there's the anchoring artist's presence and then the user engagement. So, a major example, that Adan Jerreat-Poole and I (2020) were working on, is the Yayoi Kusama *Infinity Mirrors* exhibition at the AGO and the crowdsourced approach to that project.

So the challenge has been too, in this work, to conceptualize the relationship between audiences, artists, institutions, and researchers in these encounters.

At the same time I have felt kind of a pull away from focusing on large-scale projects oriented around celebrity artist personas, to looking at emerging artists. And that has entailed a very different set of considerations. I've been looking at some accounts that are featuring digital residencies and takeovers, and that has a very different kind of community dynamic and has required a whole different scale of engagement in terms of conversations and seeking permission. It's quite another dynamic, so there's been a lot of reassessment through this work.

And I think, ultimately, my hope is that there would be a multi-dimensional and hopefully really grounded engagement with the various ways in which artists' projects and self-presences are manifesting on Instagram and on Twitter.

I'm happy to talk more about the challenges of those platforms as we go along, but I think the larger question that I'd like to draw out is that we have to constantly think about, as Andrea says, the data bodies, the visually mediated bodies, the laboring people doing this work (Kim, 2014), especially as I'm considering the arts sector. How do we engage with and encounter digital bodies and lives "generously"? That's a term that Laurie McNeill and John David Zeurn (2019) emphasize in their work. They emphasize the need to navigate questions of "scope, scale, and privacy and ephemerality" (p. 135) with care, recognizing that we are in a space where people are working, living, existing as bodies, both mediated and materialized. So there's a lot at stake here in terms of how bodies and lives are recognized, fostered, or denied, and whose digital bodies and lives are made to matter.

So, I'll leave it there for now, [and will] maybe talk a little bit more about some of the more particulars as the conversation moves along.

EVH: Thank you so much. Andrea, would you like to share some perspectives on these complex encounters?

AZ: Sure. I think perhaps I'll pick it up with what Theresa and Sarah were both talking about: the notion of a continuous reassessment. I think for me, it is a continuous reassessment of critical encounters, or encounters with criticality.

What I mean by that is that for some time I found it really difficult to approach thinking about social media platforms with an open mind. Looking back, I think I was hypercritical. My training in Communication Studies is entrenched in political economy. So to not make transparent how power works in media institutions and infrastructures feels like an ethical compromise.

But at the same time, I think any attempt to comprehend how social media platforms are inherently extractive—and by extractive, I mean how everything is understood as a data source, social and collective life is datafied for profit and power—to grasp this extractive logic, we also need to account for a range of experiences, perspectives and interactions. A one dimensional critique of social media cannot fully grasp the reach and presence of these commanding corporate entities.

I've looked for guidance to scholars, and the scholar that's sticking out for me right now, Paola Ricaurte (2019), has demonstrated how a crucial component in the process of identifying how social media platforms are an expression of the coloniality of power is recognizing possibilities for resistance. This kind of critical positionality that places the researcher within or as a part of the complex scenes of encounter is what Taina Bucher (2019) calls "ambivalence." Ambivalence is not the same thing as being neutral. I understand it to be a critical situatedness that's invested in understanding the ways in which colonial capitalism engenders social media platforms while also acknowledging possibilities for resistance. And I'm thinking about how social media is used by activists to scale social movements and strengthen connections, to document and share what's happening on the ground in real time.

A hyper-critical reading of social media undermines all of these activist efforts, lived experiences, and complex encounters. So all of this is to say that, for me, to think about social media research as complex scenes of encounter is to understand the various scenes that constitute the full encounter of the Internet in 2021.

There's a pedagogy to these complex encounters: so the Internet as a manifestation of colonial capitalism; the Internet as a disinformation medium; the Internet as detritus; the Internet as network pockets of resistance. These are the multiple encounters that coexist and co-emerge.

I suppose I occasionally return to this framework of ambivalence to structure my encounters with social media, in order to continue to draw out the interplay or interrelationship of power. That is how I'm thinking about these encounters.

EVH: Thank you so much. Karen?

KLS: I'm happy to get to respond to these threads that have already been brought up.

I have kind of a different take on what an important or what a significant encounter has been for me. It's hard to bound it precisely; it's hard to draw a box around what the encounter is. But hearing Andrea just speak of a colonial and capitalist internet, it's important for me to acknowledge that around 2002, I had a very interesting experience of being funded … through a program that the federal government [funded] at the time called NetCorps.[3] I traveled to the Philippines and lived there and worked with the human rights organization that was centered around migrant workers' rights and the families that were left behind.

And that was a really interesting experience for me, to see and to experience what connectivity agendas, what the reverberations were in different regions of the world, and to see, in a political economy sense, how that played out in everyday lives that were in different parts of the world.

And I've carried the idea forward that I want to be involved in a number of causes and issues and communities, but to think about where I want to situate myself and what kind of encounters, what kind of invitations, I should accept. One place that I've decided to situate some of my work is in the open source software community. How to bound that is a little tricky temporal[ly].

But one particular kind of moment or phase that I could identify: from 2013 to 2015, I worked as a postdoctoral fellow with Mozilla, with Mitacs funding, so it was an industrial innovation funded project (see Smith, 2019; Smith 2017). But there were a lot of digital literacy-oriented goals that I was conducting participatory research in relation to. I worked with a network of 60 organizations, primarily nonprofits, that had digital literacy goals. There was a variety of diverse communities that were served and that were reached through various network partners. And there was a synergy between open source and the idea of building the web you want, and those digital literacy efforts that we worked on through the Hive network.

And this is not to say that any context or any encounter is going to be perfect. You can run into racism, you can run into misogyny, and you can run into all kinds of things in many places that you hope are going to be safe and supportive. But I'm very hopeful. Despite the shortcomings which are present around open source, many of the people who participate in that space as being allies for all kinds of other things that are important to me.

And in terms of framing that as a research encounter and linking it to ethics: I kind of like this idea of an invitation. Whether it's a two-year engagement or it's one meeting, who you choose to spend your time with and what they care about is really, really important in relation to what kind of ethical possibility you're contributing to.

[3] A brief overview of the NetCorps program is available via Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NetCorps.

And I definitely am conscious and reflective about open source as a kind of manifestation of a lot of the ideals of alternative media, and from a communication studies perspective, a lot of people are often more familiar with scholars like Dorothy Kidd, David Skinner, Kate Milberry (see Kidd, 1999; Kozolanka, Mazepa and Skinner, 2012; Milberry, 2014). Alternative media is something people often know about, but what the linkages are to our digital times, I think some of those articulations are still being made and those connections are still being drawn.

EVH: Thank you so much everyone for highlighting these affects of messiness and ambivalence and imperfection, and the politics that are tied to those.

Question Three

EVH: I think those points really amplify one of our core goals for this workshop series which has been to emphasize as, you have said, the lack of a one-size-fits-all approach, while at the same time,outlining some examples and prompts for decision-making and [for] how to proceed amidst complexity. I wonder if you can reflect on how your encounters, through research and through everyday social media use, have prompted certain methodological developments in your work? And how have those methodological decisions as they've unfolded shaped your approach to or understanding of social media?

And perhaps we'll start with Sarah.

SB: Thank you so much, Emily, and everyone. I'll get into some of my practices—and it's an evolving set of practices, so consider this maybe time stamped at this moment in time, and it will probably continue to evolve. I hope it will continue to evolve, because the cultural production is changing and the platforms are also demanding our ongoing critical reflection and engagement.

I do want to say a little bit about how I've been trying to think through, in my research, the question of which accounts and hashtags to engage with and how, and when to ask for permission, to offer compensation—all of these questions.

I have been noticing in the critical literature in my interdisciplinary area of research that, due to privacy and ownership considerations, increasingly research on selfies and on life streaming is moving toward interview-based research that concentrates on media practices. And it's pulling away from the examination of media artifacts in a significant way.

So, for me, this is a tension: as a visual culture researcher I remain committed to what we can learn by engaging with media artifacts, with digital photographs, memes, streaming video, fan art, and many other kinds of things that might constitute a visual digital corpus around a project. That comes out of some of the work by Mieke Bal (2008) and by Ernst Van Alphen (2005), this

idea of visual philosophy, and also an ongoing interest in visual rhetoric. So I face this quandary of being committed to and needing to analyze and at times reference social media posts in my work.

Some of the ways in which I've tried to address these tensions and questions include some of the following points, and I'll just run through a few of the things that I've been putting into motion (Brophy, 2019).

I've been trying to reflect on the best practice of prioritizing very highly followed, clearly public-facing, verified accounts. Those are some of the markers that you could consider as putting some account or post in the public domain. And, arguably, permission to engage or reproduce images from very highly followed accounts is not required as long as context of the social media posts and attribution are made. So some of the figures whose images I've used in my work include very famous artists or cultural producers ranging from Cindy Sherman to Beyoncé. These are very clearly public domain accounts.

But at the same time, I want to resist the tendency for visual social media studies to be limited to celebrity studies. So there's a process of assessing very carefully, on a case-by-case basis, the nature of an account, the community in which it's embedded, the conversation that's happening, the power of relations that course through any given conversation or around an account, and potential harms like exposure to public scrutiny, or appropriation.

From there, with that case by case assessment, there can emerge a process where, in some instances, asking for permission to reproduce, or reference (directly cite) particular tweets or Instagram posts may be warranted. I'm really influenced here by Moya Bailey's work and her referencing of Mark Sample’s idea of collaborative construction: sometimes it's very necessary to move into a space of dialogue and reciprocity.

One of the challenges is trying to figure out at what moment in the research process to engage in that, and whether taking the time and energy of a cultural producer is warranted, whether the demands may be too much. So always building in the kind of right of refusal to even kind of be in that conversation.

So I really strongly do encourage that process of a case-by-case and careful analysis in a very situated way. I have in my own work, asked for permission to reproduce work by emerging artists, and for, in some cases fan art. Sometimes you will encounter a Creative Commons attribution license, which is a nice thing to happen upon which gives you a clear mandate to reproduce with attribution.

Working with emerging artists’ work and considering the precarity of many arts workers just generally—regardless of their time in the profession, especially now—I think it's important to

note that screening fees and image production fees are important to consider in many instances.

In the Canadian context you can look at the CARFAC: Canadian Artists Representation schedule of fees to gauge what might be an appropriate permission fee to offer an artist for their work. And I would include not just individual photographs, but also streaming video in that. Say you show a video, you want to show a video in a conference presentation, you can offer a screening fee for the right to show that video. That can mean a lot; it's a way of acknowledging the labour that goes on behind the scenes in the making and circulating of all this work, as Andrea mentioned earlier.

So I will stop there, but looking forward to other perspectives on some of our practices.

EVH: Thank you so much. Karen?

KLS: Thanks, I'm happy to carry on here. A lot of what Sarah's just said resonates with some of my experiences, especially around the joy of finding a Creative Commons licensed statement or declaration, where someone who is a participant, or a contact point for you or your research--where they're declarations are made clear in a very interesting way.

I have similar challenges from time to time around some of the assumptions and norms, and copyright and intellectual property are amongst them. So I think there's a default expectation that people want copyrights, and that they want their intellectual property to be protected. An institution like a university operates on that principle. But there are more balanced and nuanced understanding of things as we become more familiar with ideas like open access, and open educational resources, and some of these movements that I think are beginning to transform some of the longer-standing traditions.

In terms of a research butting-of-heads of some of those ideas, I think there's often a need as a researcher to rationalize why people are working openly, or to acknowledge that the context isn't one. In my case, when I'm interacting with people in the open source software community, to really acknowledge that there is a value norm set around openness, and around sharing, and allowing the reuse of intellectual property—versus having it locked down. There needs to be a constant dialogue explaining that.

In relation to anonymity and confidentiality issues, I think quite often on ethics forums there's an assumption that your work should be anonymised, or participants' identity should be kept confidential. I find you often have to tweak the response to the question, to explain why those concepts aren't relevant. I often find, across various institutions that I've filed ethics documents at … that I need to respond to the assumptions that are built into the forms in the first place.

But another kind of response and reaction I've had—it really surprises me—is actually around financial processes and accounting. Many of us are probably familiar with the idea that if you're engaging let's say an Indigenous community in scholarship, if you have participants that are from an Indigenous community, it may be important to perhaps give tobacco, there may be ideas that a community would be very appreciative of, in terms of a thank you. But I don't think the university always understands what is of value and what is appreciated in terms of compensation by different communities.

One encounter I've had in relation to finances is the example of giving financial compensation to a research participant. I've had cases where I've been interviewing open source software developers, and I did not think they would want an Amazon gift card, or an easily obtained commercial chain [store] gift card as compensation. [Gift cards are] something I can easily get through the research ethics process, that's very commonplace in terms of participant compensation. But it would be potentially a little offensive to some of the people I'm interviewing, and against their values set, if I'm asking them to take that—if my only mode of compensation is to give them a big tech gift card, or even a large commercial [chain] gift card.

So, I've definitely had situations where I've requested permission to donate to causes that are important to my research community, and these include organizations like the Electronic Frontier Foundation in the US, organizations like Wikipedia. That requires special approval to be able to do that. And so, to be ethical--in terms of how I'm engaging and interacting with my research participants--sometimes you need levels of institutional approval because it deviates from some of the common practices that are unquestioned.

So, I'll leave it there. I call that adventures in accounting with research.

EVH: Thank you so much, Karen, I want to make sure we preserve time for our final question but I invite Theresa and Andrea to add some thoughts to this one.

So please, Theresa.

TK: I've been thinking about Sarah's word “refusal”. And now Karen's brought up this idea of like levels of institutional approval or ethics. In my own research I've moved away from looking specifically at my communities.

So in asexual community there is an institutional ethics board by the community;[4] you have to submit for ethics approval, as a way to protect the community. And not that that process is hard or difficult or shouldn't be done, but I have made the choice to think about refusal. And so I'm thinking of Audra Simpson's “ethnographic refusal” (2007, pp. 67-80), a way of saying: I'm part

[4] See the Asexual Visibility and Education Network's “Rules for Using AVEN for Research”: www.asexuality.org/?q=research.html.

of this community, I don't really want to keep exploiting my community for research's sake. So that's why I've moved towards things like cultural objects rather than the forums online, or the people—asexual people.

So I'm thinking through what Sarah and Karen are offering because I think they set up the ways that my research has been moving away from those communities, in a certain sense. I'm thinking about the ethics of doing research that does the caring work, the reciprocity work of caring for those communities, without diving into: tell me what you wrote in the forum last Tuesday.

But I'll leave it there though.

EVH: Andrea?

AZ: Sure, I can just very briefly offer a couple of thoughts, and thanks so much to Sarah, Karen, and Theresa. You've responded to this question so brilliantly.

I'll reiterate the thread that's been in my responses, which is how ethical considerations for social media are a continuous process: there's no end point, there's no resolve, there's no attainment of ethical purity. I think the conversation today animates this further by prioritizing [tensions]. Some of us have been using this language of ethical engagements, rather than trying to operationalize ethics. And conversation has become a crucial methodology, or methodological development. When Jay Brodeur and I co-facilitated social media ethics workshops—and I think this was apparent to us even in 2017—the open exchange of ideas about social media research was central to the workshop experience. In fact, I think discussion and dialogue became so central that it was almost impossible to get through the material that we had planned.

So I guess if we can consider dialogue as a methodology, then it's precisely these conversations and encounters, both formally and informally, that continue to shape my approach and understanding of social media research.

Question Four

EVH: Thank you, everyone, so much. I think that methodology of dialogue brings us very powerfully to our final question about how we teach and disseminate and co-produce ethical considerations, and forms of engagement, for social media. And so, my final question for you all is: what current and perhaps potential pedagogical practices do you see as really crucial in this conversation? And maybe more broadly, what kind of insights have you gleaned from holding these kinds of conversations in the classroom, or in other training and mentorship spaces?

Andrea, do you maybe want to pick up on that?

AZ: Sure, and I'm keeping my eye to the time so I will condense what I want to say.

I'm going to share my experiences teaching a grad class. The grad class is called “Data Cultures”, in the Department of Communication Studies and Multimedia. I've been exceptionally fortunate to have had the opportunity to teach this class numerous times and I think, when I look back and review the syllabi, it's reflective of my own intellectual trajectory.

The course content is really meant to challenge and provoke normative data practices—so we might say things like big data or big tech—and to reorient thinking about data both ontologically and epistemologically through some radical frameworks, like maintenance and care, sovereignty, futurity, and refusal.

So the content has evolved, and the assignments have also evolved. In previous iterations students had the option to choose between a traditional research essay or a research creation project. One year we even hosted a symposium at the Sherman Centre. So all of this is to say that I’m always tweaking the course because it has to respond to evolving cultures of data. And also because I consider the feedback that I'm receiving from students enrolled in the course and a few years ago, during a class discussion, students shared how the content of the course left them feeling hopeless. I was surprised because I thought class discussions were lively and pointed to all sorts of hopeful departures. We were just on the cusp of getting to those radical frameworks that I mentioned. But obviously I had to confront my own biases about the course and what I was doing. I felt it was really crucial to maintain a critical assessment of the manifestations of data cultures. But I didn't want to be an architect of hopelessness.

So I started to think about the frameworks that I could import into the course that could allow us to address critical issues that do not have obvious solutions. I started thinking along with Sara Ahmed's work (2017) and wondered if there was a way to leverage some of the discomfort with the material in a way that could be generative (see also: Chadwick 2021, Hemmings 2012). Could we address contemporary problems through creative intervention with the aim of imagining other possibilities for collective life? And here I was inspired by Julietta Singh’s *Unthinking Mastery* (2018).

So I decided to completely revamp the assignments. I devised two different but interrelated assignments. The first one is what I called Terms of Service analysis, and this asked students to do a close analysis or a close reading of Facebook's Terms of Service. And I struggled with choosing which Terms of Service the students would work with, or if they should choose their own. At the time, it wasn't so much that Facebook was an easy target but there were a lot of very public conversations and debates about Facebook. Part of the motivation for the assignment was to have students examine this seemingly mundane and overlooked document, and to suss out the political affects of platform practices and policies. I wanted students to consider how these platforms govern, and the ways in which they function as contracts between

consumers and service providers, but also how platforms codify new norms and rules. We often accept the Terms of Service without reading them, or concede to continuous updates without consultation.

Crucial to thinking about how platforms govern is a consideration of how we receive these documents through a Western patriarchal order in the form of a contract or agreement, and we know that we're not actually agreeing to anything, really. And so I think we start to see, through that analysis—and these were things that we talked about in class—how the terms of service are not only a form of governance, but also constitute forms of governmentality. They start to modify how we think and react to, let's say, platforms.

That was one assignment. The connected, though separate, assignment was a creative intervention in the form of speculative design or speculative fiction (Benjamin 2016; Brown and Lothian 2012; Butoliya 2020; Dunne and Raby 2013; Sinders 2018; Ward 2019). There was an artifact, as I called it, and a scholarly reflection; students were encouraged to think about different forms of artistic or creative engagement. I had students that were creating mock up websites to support commercial content moderators (so unionization of commercial content moderators), there was creative fiction, someone wrote a story about how Jeff Bezos suddenly died and left his empire to an Amazon warehouse worker and charted what that take over could look like. So there's a wide array of really creative approaches that students were using to reflect on and offer critical commentary on issues pertaining to data cultures.

The purpose of the assignment was to have students engage in a creative intervention that undermined the values, beliefs and perspectives that they found to be codified in the Terms of Service. And part of that was to signal a future vision or imagining about a time when these data-driven tools platforms and applications are inherently equitable and just.

So there's the critical engagement piece, the work of undoing the interplay of relationships of power that constitute data cultures, and then there was the creative intervention piece where there’s more of a rebuilding of a possible future that could happen. It allowed students, I think, to have this unhampered space to imagine possible solutions to some of the problems, but without having to be anchored to a probability, to reality.

It doesn't mean the assignments will pave over the discomfort. In fact, in some ways, it may prove to be just as troubling to have to sit with these issues in this creative way. But in the context of the class, I think the ethical influx is about, you know, as Haraway (2016) would say, staying with the trouble. We're inhabiting these troubling norms differently and trying to see through them but still in those folds and entanglements and working through them.

So I'll stop that there, for time. Thanks.

EVH: Thank you so much, Andrea. I think Karen, and then Sarah and possibly Theresa wanted to share some thoughts on this subject as well. So I'll let you go ahead, beginning with Karen.

KLS: Great! I reflected a little bit on my response to my last question and I wasn't satisfied with how I framed tobacco offerings. So I just wanted to flag quickly that Carleton University (n.d.) has a guide that tells a much more comprehensive story of how tobacco offerings are often involved in engaging elders and Indigenous communities, so I just wanted to flag that because I mentioned it so quickly I couldn't adequately address the topic.

But, that point aside, this question of how to bring some of these ideas into the classroom: it's a very basic thing, but I regularly use the “view source” functionality on a web browser, with undergraduate students to show them something. That's a kind of ‘opening the system’ that's very easy to do in a lecture hall, it's very easy to do even through video conferencing if you're creating a video lecture. And I often find there's something that I can reveal, and there are many students that didn't even know that that was a possibility.

And pedagogically I try and carry that idea forward. It's once again very much influenced by open source and the ideals of open source: a pedagogical, but also research, technique which I've used is to have people explore their own data traces. And that can be achieved in different ways. With undergraduate learners, I've had students download their own data from Facebook or from Instagram or from other social media providers, and to conduct a reflective activity, to create a class presentation, about what they've learned.

I've also conducted a research project with a team of teen peer researchers, and with a similar intent, the teen peer researchers created short videos that showed their data trail timelines, and a kind of a ‘day in the life’ of a teenager and what kind of data sharing they may be involved in.

All of these tactics to me relate back to the idea of “view source” and understanding how the system works, what you're putting into it, and what you can get back. Those infrastructure functionalities are something I like to engage students in, either through pedagogy or through research.

SB: I've been taking lots of notes on these assignment ideas and they sound really fantastic. I will add a couple of other things. One is something that I've been using over a couple of years now in my graduate seminar on selfie culture, and it's the idea of a digital commonplace book (see Lang, 2016).

So, this assignment links life writing and digital media in an exploratory but also purposeful way. It asked students to create a course-specific digital dossier where they track, annotate, and organize their thinking and resources over the semester.

This is a kind of personal compendium that allows for students to embrace some practical tools; people often pick up Evernote or OneNote or Tumblr, some are inclined to use Instagram. Wakelet is also being used. Some students are also using Word, and then sharing it through another mechanism, and that has all sorts of accessibility advantages.

But I think what's been really helpful about this is that it not only has this sort of utility for students, in terms of constituting an archive for themselves in the course, but it becomes something that—as they gather and organize their media clippings and annotations, and tag and organize them—we move in class (because we share these as part of class discussion and small group conversation) toward richer methodological engagement. Students start to reflect on what's possible in the platform or mode that they've chosen, and talk about—with their peers—the affordances and constraints.

There's also a sense in which this is a personal automedia archiving, generative in its own right. There's a lot of self-inscription that starts to happen, and a turn toward autoethnography, automedia as method, and also I would suggest (and I'm noticing especially this year) a kind of effort of "intimate reconfiguration." I'm taking that term from Xiao et al.'s (2020) work on the Finsta, drawing from Lucy Suchman: this is the way which students are actively reconfiguring the possibilities, gravitating towards certain kinds of usages and rhetorics that they pick up as they pick up these different tools. A lot of people are now using a sequence of stories or short videos—it's not exactly the form of memory, and the memory aid or storage, that I was thinking of, but it's super interesting in terms of staging an encounter and a kind of process in relation to the work of the course.

Otherwise I will also briefly mention that I'm hoping next year in my courses to pick up the idea of "alt text as poetry" from Bojana Coklyat and Shannon Finnegan's (2020) project.[5] This is an effort to reframe this accessibility aspect that is one of those behind-the-scenes necessities, often, in our research, that we think about late in the process. Maybe we're submitting an article and a journal has a requirement for alt text to accompany images. But Coklyat and Finnegan ask what would happen if, and this is a quote, "we reframed alt text as a type of poetry, and provided opportunities to talk about it and practice writing it" (2020, "About our project").

So they suggest, if we engage in the practice of trying to describe the images that we're working with at an earlier part of the process, that this could help to foster a greater sense of belonging in digital spaces for disabled and mad subjects engaging in media encounters. I'll report back in conversation on how this goes as a kind of active classroom exercise, linking ethical questions and accessibility in our engagements with social media archives.

[5] See: https://alt-text-as-poetry.net/

TK: I've been taking notes! In the interest of time, I won't offer my thoughts, but I've learned so much.

EVH: Thank you, Theresa, and I think that's a perfect point to open up the last few minutes of our session to some questions and comments from our audience here. We have such rich ideas and questions and phrases, and also these really engaging assignments, to think with.

So I invite our audience to share questions or comments for our panelists, in the chat, which I can bring to the panelists. And also, panelists, if you have any questions for one another, we can also give some time to those. So I'll pause for a moment and let that thinking unfold and monitor the chat for the conversation.

KLS: I will turn on my mic and ask a question of Andrea, actually. I am very curious, when your students have worked with Terms and Conditions, are they designing incredibly long, scrolling, lengthy manifestos of Terms and Conditions, or have they reworked the genre?

AZ: A couple years ago the assignment was tied to rescripting the Terms of Service, and so it had to be done in a very manageable way, but they were focusing on some of the more central facets of the documents. For the most recent iteration, it was more of a close reading, like an analysis. But for the one where they actually had to kind of rewrite them in a way that really centered equity and justice, I think that they found it challenging to input concepts or language into that existing framework. Through the process, it was interesting to see—because for that iteration of the class, they were able to choose from any platform—and there was one, I want to say Pinterest (and I could be wrong and I apologize) that it was just remarkably simplified, almost too simplified, the terms of service. And they couldn't actually take the assignment anywhere. I was kind of astounded by that, that's not what I was expecting.

EVH: Thank you so much. I'm going to reiterate a question that's popped up in the chat here, which is about refusal and citation ethics. The question continues: “many digital cultural workers and creators do not want academics citing their work. How do we negotiate honoring their thinking while still respecting the boundaries of (no) citations.”

And I think that question is this open for anybody on the panel to pick up and think about.

TK: I'll speak to it. I think it's a really good question, and the one that I've been thinking about the most in my research, mostly because I know that a lot of the community members that I'm trying to do research with/of/for/by don't want to be cited, or don't want their work included. And I'm trying to think through what it means to still talk through my research questions in conversation with these communities, which is hard stuff.

My method has been agreeing with their refusal; to be in good relation with those communities means agreeing that their participation should not be included in the research, and that means

the research questions change, which is sometimes hard to do. But I make the research questions change.

The other thing is that, by moving to platform analysis, I think I've done more work thinking about networks and how social media moves and circulates cultural production, rather than looking at a particular piece or a particular person online.

Sometimes I'll mention them in general—like 'subjects' as a generality about social media--but I won't name specifics. Or I'll put a list of folks, and then talk about the platform itself or the network itself rather than: oh, this person does this one interesting thing.

It just means different research questions. And I think that's the more ethical thing to do.

KLS: And as a potential strategy, if there's a group of digital cultural workers, if they know each other: a group statement, or a group expression, that people are comfortable with being in the research record, which isn't attributed to any individual and without any of the group even being identified.

So it could be a situation where 10 selfie creators have articulated that these themes are important to them, or 10 zine makers—it doesn't need to be tied to like such an empirical number of human beings. But I would sometimes look to see if there's a group expression that doesn't get tied back to any particular person, if you're able to convene community or engage community in that type of way.

EVH: Sarah did you want to jump in there?

SB: I think—and this thinking is a result of my collaboration with Adan Jerreat-Poole—engaging in mixed methods that are characterized by self-reflexive work can allow you to create a space where you have a maybe more encompassing approach to the situatedness of the cultural production and phenomena that you're engaging with. And then you can, as your research project moves along, make decisions about which elements of the whole process you then come to emphasize.

As Adan and I developed our work on the crowdsourced elements of the exhibition of the AGO, we did a lot of self-reflection about our research process, and the digital labor of studying this crowdsourced archive. And that allowed us, I think, to do that set of adjustments—where we realized midway through the process that we needed to really focus on trends rather than individual posts in the crowdsourced archive, the Twitter data set that we had pulled. So we kind of linked those trends to our own experiences of studying and visiting the exhibition and engaging in the new digital scholarship components.

That was, I think, a really productive and supportive research process. And the collaboration, the dialogue that we have built into that really, really was helpful along the way, as we struggled to learn some of those lessons and make those adaptations together.

EVH: Well, thank you everyone. I have the unfortunate duty of marking the end of our 90 minutes. This has been such a rich conversation. I hope you'll all join me in using the affordances of our little Zoom boxes to share our gratitude with Andrea and Theresa and Karen and Sarah for being here today. Thank you so much. And thank you also to all of you, our participants for your engagement.

Just a reminder that links to this and other recorded workshops in the *Do More with Digital Scholarship* series can be found on the Sherman Center website. That's scds.ca for Sherman Centre for Digital Scholarship. And you can see other info about upcoming workshops there. And please do also feel welcome to connect with the Sherman Centre further, to continue this conversation. In recognizing the importance of ongoing conversation today, we really want to point to that and identify the Sherman Centre as a space [where] you can continue those conversations.

AZ: Thanks Emily, and I want to say thanks to Emily for the brilliant work of organizing this session, and a huge thank you to Jay Brodeur and Isaac Pratt, our collaborators in the workshop module. Thanks so much to both and for taking the time to be here today.

EVH: Thank you everyone, have a marvelous weekend when it arrives, and thank you for joining us.

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