Researching social media: Confidentiality, anonymity and reconstructing online practices

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Introduction

In only a matter of years, people have populated online spaces in ways that interweave us in mediated spheres as part of our lived realities. We live in screens and in the intersections between screens. Many of these spaces are public and semi-public. At first glance, personal practices in these spaces might appear at odds with the public character of the venue: yet self-presentational strategies and interactions become more meaningful when we share actual traces of life. The concept of privacy is hence a moving target, constantly being negotiated and renegotiated as a consequence of how we perceive the in-flux boundaries between public and private spheres. And not only is our personal life closely integrated with mediated practices. Professional life is increasingly moving online, with the emergence of social intranets attempting to replicate social network sites within enterprise contexts.

In this paper, I will discuss how we can research mediated practices, both personal and professional, without compromising the privacy of the people being studied. One core premise is that the potential public character of the content and people being studied does not warrant the public display and exposure of the research subjects. Traditional research ethics, ensuring the privacy of the research subject, remains key, and perhaps ever more so.

I have conducted several studies on how people make use of the Internet in their everyday life for personal matters, as well as in organizational work and professional and work-related domains. Two different qualitative studies will be presented as examples, demonstrating why researchers need to tread carefully when approaching research subjects, gathering data, and presenting results in publications. The first example is taken from a study of young people's use of social media, and is based on interviews of 20 young people between 15 and 19 years of age, as well as on observations of their online practices in blogs and social network sites (SNS) in the years 2004–2007. The second example is taken from a study of the use of a social intranet in an international ICT consultancy enterprise. This study was conducted in the years 2010–2013, and is based on interviews with 27 employees as well as on analyses of their social intranet user patterns. In the latter example, the social intranet is only available for the company employees, and the content studied cannot be republished in research publications. In both examples, the informants being interviewed gave their informed consent to participate, and were guaranteed anonymity, complying with requirements and procedures for data handling as defined by the Privacy Issues Unit at the Norwegian Social Science Data Service (NSD).

In the following pages, I will first briefly review relevant literature on mediated practices and the specific challenges this poses for research. I will then discuss the particular research challenges experienced in studying social media practices in personal and professional contexts, before concluding with a discussion of the consequences of blurred private/public/professional realities for qualitative research.

Background: Researching online practices

Traditional research ethics stipulate certain requirements regarding how research should be conducted (for example, participants should be informed about the purpose of the study, that participation is voluntary, and that they can withdraw from the study at any time). Only then can the participants give their informed consent to participate. The requirement to obtain informed consent from research participants is incorporated in European legislation (European Commission, 2013: 14). For Norwegian research projects, the Privacy Issues Unit at the Norwegian Social Data Service (NSD) ensures that research projects, including the recruitment of participants and the management of personal data, are conducted according to Norwegian privacy laws. The unit ensures that the collection, safeguarding, storage and reuse of personal data comply with ethical and legal standards.

Yet, whereas traditional research ethics may seem relatively uncomplicated, challenges arise for researchers who attempt to understand and analyze online personal practices, particularly when it comes to republishing online content in research publications. When discussing research of online behaviour, we need to discuss the character and perceptions of online behaviour as situated between the always renegotiated spaces between what is private and what is public.

Overall, the dual notions of online/offline tend to keep us focused on the differences between online and offline rather than on the embodied realness of online behaviours. Addressing online/offline is preferable to the «old» dual notions of virtual/real, yet we need to improve our understanding of online life as an integral part of life. Users' behaviour online is usually «firmly rooted in their experience as embodied selves» (Ess, 2003: 26). Similarly, Nissenbaum (2011: 43) argues that life online is thickly integrated with social life, and that online practices «retain fidelity with the fundamental organizing principles of human practice and social life». Thus, norms governing the sharing and distribution of personal information remain key even for social life online (ibid.). From this we can assume that research on mediated practices should comply with conventional research ethics.

In a Norwegian context, the NESH guidelines for research ethics stress the importance of the researcher considering people's perceptions of what is private and what is public (Bromseth, 2003, Forskningsetiske komiteer, 2006: 17). For example, reader debates in online newspapers are manifestly public. Observations of public offline settings usually do not require consent from the observed subjects, who remain unknown and anonymous to the researcher (Mann, 2003). Similarly, following the first version of ethical guidelines for Internet research published by the AoIR ethics working committee, «the greater the acknowledged publicity of the venue, the less obligation there may be to protect individual privacy, confidentiality, right to informed consent, etc.» (Ess, 2002: 5).

However, assessing the acknowledged publicity of an online venue is not always straightforward, at least not as seen from the point of view of the participants. A personal blog might be publicly available for all to read, though very often it can be regarded as a personal and private space by the author. As a researcher I typically inform study participants that personal data will be anonymized and that it will not be possible to identify who they are.

This means that I cannot republish online content originally published by research participants even if that content is publicly available online. The fact that people publish personal information online, and leave publicly available traces of sociability and self-performance, does not mean that this content is «up for grabs» by social scientists without carefully considering the privacy of the people being studied. As emphasized in a number of studies, people may maintain strong expectations of privacy and ownership of personal data even if that data is in fact publicly available (Walther et al., 2008, Lüders, 2011, boyd and Marwick, 2011). Other online spaces are manifestly restricted in terms of publicness and are only accessible by invited and registered users. Private Facebook, Twitter and LiveJournal profiles as well as company intranets and online resources should leave no researcher in doubt as to whether they can use this content in their own publications. They cannot, at least not without consent and anonymizing the content.

Much has changed since the publication of the first version of ethical guidelines for Internet research by AoIR in 2002. As a consequence of technological developments, a new version of the guidelines was published in 2012 (Markham and Buchanan, 2012). These guidelines propose that a number of principles are fundamental to an ethical approach to Internet research. First of all, the researcher needs to consider the vulnerability of the people being studied. The greater the vulnerability, the greater the obligation of the researcher to protect them. Secondly, a one-size-fits-all approach is not viable. Harm is defined contextually, and assessing how to conduct ethically sound research must be made according to the specific context. Thirdly, digital information involves individual persons even if it is not immediately apparent how and where persons are involved in the research data. Fourthly, the rights of subjects may outweigh the benefits of research. Fifthly, ethical issues may arise during all steps of the research process. Ensuring that the privacy of the people being studied is not compromised is therefore important in all stages of the process, from planning to publication and dissemination. Finally, the guidelines stress ethical decision-making as a deliberative process, meaning that researchers must consult as many people and resources as possible in this process.

I will return to some of these principles in the conclusion, addressing how two different studies require certain strategies for ensuring the privacy of the research participants.

The two case studies I will discuss are similar in that I rely on interviewing people in addition to studying their online practices. As the participants have agreed to take part in the study on the condition that their identity will not be revealed, I do not include explicit examples of content they have published online. Protecting the privacy of my informants concerns how I gather and store data, as well as how I refer to them and their online practices in publications. As will be evident, a consequence of the agreement with the informants is that any empirical examples of content must be reconstructed, even if this practice is scientifically disputed. Reconstructing empirical examples does not imply inventing examples, but making required changes in order to maintain the original meaning and message while ensuring the original content cannot be retrieved through searches.

Example 1: The use of social media among young people

In my PhD work I followed 20 people between 15 and 19 years of age in the period 2004–2007. I followed their online practices in their blogs and in social network sites, and I interviewed all of them once. My informants were guaranteed anonymity, and their names were changed in the analyses and publications. These conditions were described in a formal postal letter of consent, which the informants signed. According to the Norwegian Data Inspectorate (Datatilsynet), minors who are 15 years or older can give their informed consent in the relevant sort of cases (Datatilsynet, 2004).

My study concerned mediated individual practices, some of which could expose the informants in rather intimate ways (e.g. revealing photos or textual confessions) and disclose their identity if republished in the context of this thesis. Though these expressions were often publicly available online, efforts were made to secure the privacy of the informants. I reported on their online lives and user patterns, but I did not republish their online expressions or photos.

At that time, young Norwegian bloggers typically avoided revealing their full name in their blogs and/or protected all or part of the content as accessible only to connected blog friends (e.g. with friends-only blogs in LiveJournal). Hence you could not google my informants and find their blogs. Yet those with publicly available blogs were all easily recognizable if you found their blogs and knew them offline: they revealed their first names, and often published pictures and other information that exposed their identities. My obligation to ensure the anonymity of my informants meant I simply could not include any information that might identify them. My inability to include content which my informants had created online was thus a consequence of conducting research interviews. It was simply not viable to combine anonymous interviews with analyses of online practices if those practices were also reproduced in my work.

However, even if a researcher relies only on analyzing online content (and thus avoids the problem of revealing the identity of interviewees who have been promised anonymity), the public availability of content does not necessarily imply that content can be used without consent, or at all. We need to consider people's perceptions of what is public and what is private. The experiences and perceptions of my informants illustrate the complexities involved.

Informants who had a publicly available presence (even if anonymous or pseudonymous) perceived these spaces as private. They did not regard their blogs as public by practice, even if the blogs indeed were public by technology. The development of media technologies has always been connected to the increasing exposure of the private sphere in the public sphere (Warren and Brandeis, 1890: 195, Barthes, [1980] 2001: 119, Meyrowitz, 1986: 99). Network cultures reinforce this tendency. In public contexts people generally act in accordance with the expectations of several other groups (Meyrowitz, 1986). Even so, personal blogs and social profiles can be perceived as private, even when they are publicly available:

> Kristoffer (18): For a long time I had a title on my blog saying that if you know me, don't say that you have read this.
>
> Marika: Why?
>
> Kristoffer: Because then it would affect what I write. Then I would begin to think in relation to that person. I try to write my thoughts, but if I know that a person is reading it I begin to think of that person as a recipient. And I just want my message to get across; this is my message to myself.

18-year-old Linnea describes a similar experience with her blog as her own private space:

> Linnea (18): I try to pretend that no one reads it. Or that I should be able to be honest and write what I want to without thinking, no, I can't say that because he will read it and I can't write that because she will read it and I definitely can't write that because the whole class will read it.

In spite of the fact that Linnea, like Kristoffer, emphasizes that she cannot consider her readers when she writes, she does appreciate having readers and is happy and grateful when she meets people who have followed her life through her texts and photos: «I think that if the diary is worth spending time on, then I am doing something good. […] And that I can mean something to someone. That feels really good.» Kristoffer and Linnea publish texts and photos online because they enjoy writing and taking photos, and they appreciate comments from readers.

The interviews demonstrate the indeterminate distinction between the private and public subject, and also pinpoint how offline as well as online publics include private spaces:

> Kristian (17): After all, the Internet is no more public than the world outside […]. I don't care if a stranger sitting at the next table in a Chinese restaurant eavesdrops on my personal conversation with a friend.

The Internet is more public to the extent that actions are available to an audience independently of time and space: i.e. expressions stretch beyond the here and now, as is the case for public blogs, social profiles and photo sharing services. All the same, Kristian does have a point that often seems to disappear when distinctions between private and public arenas are discussed: private actions take place within public spaces both online and offline. My informants thus perceive the Internet as a public space, but in this public space they create their own private spaces where they share personal narratives and experiences. Worrying that personal information published online can be misused is characteristic for dominant societal discourses, also affecting the perceptions of the informants. Simultaneously, they regard having a public presence online as meaningful and valuable. My informants often appeared surprisingly honest online, but they typically emphasized that they negotiated what they shared, as they were well aware that their blogs were publicly available. Fifteen-year-old old Mari explains, «I only share a little bit of myself with the rest of the world, not everything».

Although I did not include content published by my informants in my publications, I did include extracts from other «typical» teenage blogs and profiles, but I chose to reconstruct them, and I got their informed consent to publish the content in my own work. One of the extracts I included was a blog post by 17-year-old Mari. She writes mainly friends-only posts in her LiveJournal, available only for users she has added to her friends list. Occasionally she makes exceptions and writes public posts, and I used one of these posts to illustrate how she negotiates boundaries between her private and public self-performance. I first translated her blog post to Norwegian for a Norwegian publication. I then translated it back to English for my thesis. I also googled different parts of the quote to make sure her blog could not be retrieved based on the reconstructed post in my own work. This does mean that my research becomes less traceable, though I reconstructed her blog post to keep Mari's identity anonymous:

> The first time we kissed was at the traffic lights near Hyde Park. I was still sort of in a state of shock and giggled and laughed at what he said without saying much myself. To be honest I was quite frightened by the weirdness of the situation. My Internet friend had come out of the screen and as always when that happens, my brain and ability to formulate do not cooperate particularly well.
>
> So there we are waiting for the green man and he has his arm around me and I lean in to him and try not to pass out from all of these new experiences and I look up at him and smile (something which in itself is nothing new – I always smile) and he looks at me and leans towards me and we kiss. I get a bit funny inside but I do not gasp, and it is actually not unbelievably romantic. […] We kiss affectionately with open mouths and then the green man appears and we stop kissing and we giggle a bit before we move across the road while still closely entwined. («Mari's blog post»)

It may seem contradictory that Mari chooses to air a rather private experience in public; however, in an e-mail she explains that she chose to make this post public, because «it's about a very important and positive event in my life, and I managed to write something nice and reasonably meaningful». In continuing she explains that she is satisfied with how she manages to present herself and her personality, and that she wants to share this story because she knows that numerous others identify with «Internet romances». In this way, online spaces are used to mediate personal experiences and bring what is private into public spaces.

My informants stressed that they felt they had personal control over mediated expressions, meaning they could carefully create expressions that they were comfortable sharing. The consequence of this perceived sense of control implied they would share stories online that they would not typically share with their friends offline:

> Andreas (18): It's easier to express yourself accurately online, so online conversations are often profound and very open. You can write it down, and have a second look at what you're trying to say. If you don't like how you expressed something, you can just edit it. Then it's easier to be honest, and I think it's easier to tell people what I really feel.

Most of the texts and photos that Andreas (18) publishes are publicly available. Private revelations, however, are only available to registered friends or acquaintances (i.e. people added to his friends lists). Yet occasionally he needs time to decide what he wants to share with others:

> Andreas (18): You kind of want to get it out, but you don't want anyone to know just yet, so it is good to be able to write a private post. Even if I have a tendency to make private posts available to friends when I read them the day after.

Anders (17) writes a paper diary in addition to his online diary: «I'm more open and honest in my diary, but on the whole what I write in my diary comes out on LiveJournal a couple of days later. I just need some time to think and such.» The comments of Andreas and Anders indicate that the opportunity to construct expressions and to be able to reconsider these expressions at a later point sometimes make them present themselves differently in mediated settings. Similarly, the physical absence of others makes users feel more in control of their mediated sense of self, or in Goffmanian terms, users have more control with expressions given off (Goffman, [1959] 1990: 210–212).

In other words, there are unique qualities with mediated forms of communication, and these qualities affect how individual users choose and manage to present themselves. Thus mediated communication is sometimes characterized by candidness, as users have more time to create expressions and exercise greater control over self-representations.

To summarize, Internet services such as blogs and SNSs are peculiar: although technically they might be public or semi-public, these spaces provide us with an opportunity to be publicly private in modes we have not previously been accustomed to. We can inhabit them and share experiences in the form of texts and photos with an audience that stretches far beyond what used to be possible in pre-Internet times. Yet my informants were very clear about their limits of intimacy. The online subject can be open and honest, often more so than in offline sociability, yet what is made available remains a filtered reflection of the self. Most importantly, the ambiguity of blogs as private or public means that «technically public» does not equal «public in practice» or «public» as content that researchers can choose to use as they please.

Example 2: The use of a social intranet among knowledge workers

The second case study I will discuss with regard to research ethical assessments is a qualitative in-depth study of the adoption of the social intranet Jive Software by an international ICT consultancy enterprise that employs approximately 5,000 people. The study, involving qualitative interviews with 27 employees located in four different countries and observations of user patterns in the social intranet, was conducted by Lene Pettersen and myself.

Consultants in all divisions of the enterprise are typical knowledge workers, and the company introduced JIVE in the summer of 2010 to enable employees to «build professional networks, develop competence by following others more skilled, finding out what others are doing and not reinventing the wheel, having things you're working on easy to find and share, easily work with colleagues in other business units» (obtained from the company's strategy for implementing JIVE). JIVE has been organized as a social intranet tool, with national as well as public intranets and restricted groups for discussions and sharing of content, experiences and knowledge. The newsfeed that the employees see when they log in depends on which office they belong to, which peers they follow, and which groups they have joined as members (i.e. similar to how Facebook and LinkedIn function).

As used by our case company, JIVE is a non-public space: online practices are only available to the employees in the company. As such information is not public. In this study, protecting the privacy of our informants proved to be very important. In the course of the research process we also realized we had to keep the company anonymous in order to report as truthfully as possible what our informants told us. When conducting qualitative research projects, the aim is often to uncover in-depth knowledge about experiences and opinions as truthfully as possible. To succeed, researchers need to develop trust and rapport with the interviewees.

In our study, we soon experienced the benefits of having established a relationship of trust with our informants. They were informed about the study being conducted without disclosing their identity to the company or anyone else. Information about handling of data was included in the information about the study that the informants received before giving their informed consent to participate. This letter also described that the study had been reported to the Norwegian Social Science Data Services, and that the study and the handling of empirical data was conducted in compliance with its regulations with regard to confidentiality and archiving of data. It would not be possible to recognize the persons interviewed in any reports or articles. This formal procedure for guaranteeing that the study would ensure our informants' confidentiality and privacy seems to have helped us to establish rapport and trust. We experienced a high level of candidness from our informants, as demonstrated by highly opinionated expressions about the company, the social intranet and their local work environment.

In the past few years, the company had faced a series of acquisitions, reorganizations, and a significant labour turnover, resulting in frustration for some informants. The interviews we conducted provided us with in-depth insight into the workplace experiences of our informants. The openness our informants showed us demonstrates the importance of having established a trustful relationship.

> No, as I said earlier, our culture has changed significantly. When I started […] everyone had their own voice and were individuals with their own opinions. This has changed. Now we're supposed to brown nose those with many important and international contacts and who might be promoted to

> an important position. [Those who participate extensively in JIVE] are those who try the hardest to position themselves. […] Their billable time is minor, and they talk a lot [laughs]. (Female in her 40s)

All is not misery in our case company: there are distinctive differences between the informants, and also differences in the experience of the work environment at local offices, and the quote above is representative only for the above informant. Yet her opinions are reflected in more modest forms among other informants as well:

> [Active users of the social intranet] are the Yes-people. Those who flatter and agree with the management. The Yes-people are those who participate in the social intranet, and who reproduce their Yes-views in their Yes-clan (male in his 30s).

This input is crucial when we try to understand the employees' experiences of the company's social intranet. The honesty our informants showed us made them more vulnerable, and making sure they could not be identified by the company or anyone else became even more essential to us. Moreover, conducting the interviews uncovered that reluctant users of the social intranet had significant privacy concerns: for example, they would not «like» critical posts by colleagues even if they actually liked the content, because their own name would then be visible to everyone in the company, including managers (Pettersen and Brandtzæg, 2012: 13–14). Conversely, the experiences and opinions of informants who actively participate with content in the social intranet could also increase the vulnerability of informants if their identity were disclosed.

> I think you can use JIVE to brand your name within the organization. I'm not saying I'm schmoozing with the management […]. But with JIVE […] like when I comment on a post from [manager], the distance between us decreases and my

> name might be noticed. […] There were no similar opportunities before JIVE. Like I couldn't keep track of what my manager was thinking and feeling, and then e-mail him and say, «Hey, I really like what we're doing now». (Female in her 30s)

Our promise to keep the informants anonymous both for the company and for the public means we avoided providing information about the office they belong to and their specific age, and we removed any information that might identify them. Gender and approximate age are included, as in the examples above: «female in her 40s». The combination of information about gender, specific age and office can easily reveal who many of them are. We carefully and consistently assessed whether the information we included in publications contain information that could result in individuals being identifiable. This is of course particularly important as our informants have shown us a level of trust and told us stories that might jeopardize their professional position in the company and even future positions if they choose to pursue a career elsewhere.

In this study, our responsibility to our informants makes it more challenging to present JIVE in a meaningful way to readers who are not familiar with the service, i.e. most readers. Screenshots of how the company makes use of JIVE cannot be included as is, but must be manipulated to protect both the company and the users. In her work, Pettersen has manipulated screenshots from the company's social intranet, substituting fictional photos and names for real photos and names in order to visualize the technical solution (for illustrations, see Pettersen and Brandtzæg, 2012). This practice resembles what Markham (2012) has labelled «fabrication» of empirical data. As Markham explains, within scientific communities «fabrication» of data is typically regarded as unethical research conduct. Yet, considering the need to protect the privacy of individuals when conducting qualitative studies of online practices, Markham claims fabrication is a sensible and ethically sound way out. Instead of including empirical examples as is, the researcher instead creates composite accounts of persons, events or interactions. Fabricated examples are hence ideal type descriptions induced from the material. Such research practices are still scientifically disputed, and the need to protect the privacy of informants might jeopardize opportunities to get published. As Markham explains with reference to another case,

> I learned that a publisher had rejected a paper written by two of my colleagues, solely on the claim that they were faking their data by presenting invented composite blogs instead of quoting directly from actual blogs. (Markham, 2012: 334)

Similarly, Pettersen and I have received reviews of our work that express concern about the lack of detail about JIVE: «A first concern is the lack of detail we have on JIVE – its particular functionality – screenshots and so forth might be useful» (from a review on a paper submitted to a conference). Pleasing reviewers would require us to reconstruct, in greater detail, screenshots with fabricated textual and visual content to protect the anonymity of the company and the employees, which in turn might prompt reviewers to criticize the illustrations as fake and constructed.

To summarize, researching non-public company websites that contain confidential information requires specific considerations with regard to how the researchers treat the research subjects. Clearly, content cannot be published as is. However, also information retrieved through research interviews must be handled carefully. Our informants trusted us, and several informants shared stories they would not share publicly in the company. The relation between trust and sharing is of course well documented in several studies, and is also something we as researchers benefit from. As a consequence we cannot share information or *combinations of information* that might harm our informants if they are made recognizable. We can consequently relate our experiences with arguments that point towards the need for fabricating or reconstructing data in ways that protect informants, even if such reconstructions might be at odds with requirements about how research results are usually presented.

Conclusion

The informants in the two case studies are vulnerable, but for different reasons. Young research participants are vulnerable due to their age. In my study of young people's online practices, my informants were also vulnerable as a consequence of their self-performance practices in social media. Even if their blogs were publicly available, they still perceived their own blogs as their own private space and disclosed honest and intimate (if nevertheless filtered and edited) accounts of life. The interviews were conducted on the condition that the participants would remain anonymous, and this made it impossible to include content from their online practices in research publications. The knowledge workers interviewed in the second case study are adults with a high level of social, cultural and economic capital. However, most of our informants made themselves more vulnerable by sharing experiences and opinions they would not share openly in the company. They felt comfortable doing so because they trusted us to keep their identities anonymous.

Both case studies demonstrate how a one-size-fits-all approach with regard to ethical decision-making is not viable. The peculiarities of each case are only uncovered in the actual research process, and consequently the premises for making ethically sound judgments changed during the course of the studies. The interviews with the young bloggers uncovered complicated perceptions of private versus public, which only emphasized how I could not possibly use their content as I pleased in my own work. Similarly, Pettersen and I entered the social intranet case study rather naively, thinking it would suffice to keep the identity of the informants anonymous. The stories we heard are typical for knowledge workers, yet we could only report these stories truthfully if we also kept the identity of the enterprise anonymous. In both cases, ethical issues arose throughout the research process. Moreover, both case studies point to the importance of thinking in terms of ethics throughout the research process, from planning to publication and dissemination. Strategies to ensure the privacy of the research participants, for instance, instilled creativity concerning ways of illustrating online practices. These could not be republished as is in publications, but had to be anonymized and reconstructed even if such reconstructions might be at odds with «normal» scientific practice.

A process approach to research ethics means that the particular judgments made in the above case studies cannot easily be applied in other research cases. Ethical challenges will arise at different stages in the research process, and many of these challenges will only become apparent as the researcher becomes embedded in her research project.

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