

Protecting our rights to privacy and digital dignity

April 21 2015, by Emma Thorne



How many of us read the terms and conditions when signing up to a social media account or downloading a new app? And does agreeing to these rules offer us any real protection from big business looking to mine our data for profit?

Researchers are now aiming to address the ethical challenges around [social media](#) by designing new tools and services to help citizens protect their privacy and take more control over their own data.

The Citizen-Centric Approaches to Social Media Analysis (CaSMa) project is being led by experts at the Horizon Digital Economy Research Institute of The University of Nottingham and benefits from more than £400,000 in funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

Protecting privacy and respecting rights

Dr Ansgar Koene, senior research fellow on the project, said: "The CaSMa project looks at social media research and services from a citizen perspective. We consider the research or service practices from the perspective of the common user. From that perspective we ask how we can improve the way research and services are implemented to better protect privacy and respect the rights and dignity of user-participants. One of the projects I am currently working on, for example, is a survey concerning the types of research that people would be willing to actively consent to having their social media data used for, and the level of transparency they would like to have concerning who is doing the research, how the data is analysed and what the results will be used for."

Users of social media are generally unaware of how much of their fragmented personal data is collated from across social media sites—and even taken from the content of their free, web-hosted emails (e.g. Gmail)—and how this can be used to build detailed personal profiles.

Companies can be less than transparent about how they are accessing and using customers' personal information, standard terms and conditions obtain blanket consent without being explicit about the intentions. Facebook, for example, included a clause in its terms and conditions stating that data may be used "for internal operations including [...] and research". Personal data uploaded via social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook provides a rich stream that can be mined for research both by corporations who want to more effectively target their own products or revenue bearing adverts for others, and by academics conducting behavioural studies.

Just last year, Facebook came under fire from researchers who condemned an experiment in which it manipulated almost 700,000 users' news feeds to see whether it would affect their emotions. While common

practice in advertising, researchers argued that it breached ethical guidelines on informed consent by not allowing users to specifically decide whether or not to take part.

Dr Elvira Perez Vallejos, a senior research fellow in Horizon with expertise in health communication, said: "Informed consent lies at the heart of research ethics and what Facebook did was not informed consent. Manipulating the moods of a random collection of people—including children and those of unknown mental health—was potentially dangerous; it is completely unethical to perform such research with potentially vulnerable groups without clear and explicit agreement."

Ethical issues

Research associate Chris Carter is examining the existing academic ethical review processes that are currently being use to evaluate social media research projects.

He added: "Most people use social media sites like Twitter in the moment, as if they are chatting to friends in a café without considering that their posts are all still accessible for some time afterwards. This information could be useful for researchers, for example those who are studying linguistics and the way our language is changing.

"We are speaking to academics about their ethical review process and whether they have a consistent approach to the way in which personal data is used and consent is obtained."

Research associate Ramona Statache is examining the differences in how the public, industry and government interpret ideas of privacy, right of access or data security. Our boundaries are being redrawn, often leaving open to interpretation issues as important as the private – public

distinction. Resulting insights are then put into practice in various public interest events such as a recent free CaSMa workshop, which targeted small and medium businesses, offering guidance on the ethical use of digital technology to enable businesses to build and maintain an open and trustworthy approach to the use of customers' [personal data](#).

In a separate initiative, Dr Perez Vallejos is leading CaSMa's collaboration with iRights.uk, an organisation that works to enable children and [young people](#) to access the digital world 'creatively, knowledgeably and fearlessly'. In a series of youth juries in Nottingham, Leeds and London, groups of young people aged between 11 and 17 years old will watch an acted out scenario related to online behaviour before judging on the rights and wrongs of what they have seen and how they would change the outcome. It aims to provide young people with the knowledge and awareness required to make informed choices when using the internet. These youth juries are an innovative way to engage young people and facilitate reflections around their digital rights such as the right to remove digital content from social media sites or the right to know who is holding or profiting from their information posted on online platforms

In other workshops with Nottingham schools, including Firbeck Primary School in Wollaton, Dr Perez Vallejos will be leading practical sessions with pupils facilitating discussions on how they are accessing the internet, for example whether the access is supervised by their parents and the type of material they are accessing online, before exploring their feelings about the content they are viewing online. The focus of these workshops goes beyond internet safety, aiming to co-produce solutions with the children to enable them to make informed decisions concerning their online behaviour.

In addition to social media sites including Twitter, Facebook and Tumblr, the two year project will also be looking at data obtained via

direct communications including email and chat, as well as other monitoring data like GPS, accelerometer or other data from smart devices like smart phones, tablets and smart TVs.

Professor Derek McAuley, the principal investigator on the project, highlights the need to engage the citizens in the social media research process: "Increasingly social media is private by default – the heyday of people publishing their personal lives to the world at large is declining and only through direct informed engagement with the users will we be able to access the majority of this information in the future."

Provided by University of Nottingham

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