Your Tweets as Research Evidence

March 13, 2019

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It's finals season. You have three exams this week and two essays to write. Naturally, you lock yourself in the library, working tirelessly to complete all your work and study all the information needed. As a study break, you decide to scroll through Twitter, commiserating with other college students about the stress of finals. One of your tweets that jokes about how stressed you are and how you plan on sleeping in the library goes viral, with over thousands of retweets and favorites, even reaching researchers and psychologists studying stress and test anxiety in college students. One psychologist thinks your tweet fits in perfectly with his study and wants to use it in his published results. Is this ethical? Just because you voiced your opinion on social media, does this mean it can be used by researchers to embellish their writings or even as evidence in a study?

In the past decade, Internet use has skyrocketed, generating popularity of social media sites. Often, people post and blog about extremely personal parts of their lives, both anonymously and publicly. However, this presents a difficult dilemma for modern day researchers. Is it ethical and valid to use these intimate anecdotes and individual information in a professional study? Although the web has opened up a myriad of new research opportunities easily accessible to people around the world, ethical guidelines are insufficient and somewhat conflicting when it comes to digital data (Sugiura, Wiles & Pope). Because of its novelty and ease, many researchers, however, continue to use the internet despite the lack of regulation. One study utilized web forums, where people discuss a certain topic, to "explore how people interact and communicate about buying medicines and to understand the types of information available for individuals wanting to purchase medicine online" (Sugiura, Wiles & Pope). The forums chosen were public to view but required some type of membership and username in order to contribute to the discussion. When researchers entered these discussion portals, identifying

themselves and describing their intentions of using information obtained there, members were immediately off put and weary, insinuating that people may not agree to share certain personal anecdotes with researchers. This leads to the question: just because someone reveals information online, does this constitute the use of it in a study? The Belmont Report states, "An agreement to participate in research constitutes a valid consent only if voluntarily given" (7). This means without coercion or any pressure. Thus, perhaps the questions should be: does publishing online through social media or other platforms equal valid consent? Is it assumed to be voluntarily given?

One of the main platforms people use to share their feelings, experiences and thoughts on any type of event occuring in their lives is social media. This category is composed of many different websites, some of the most popular being Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Youtube. At first glance, gaining participation through online sources seems like a groundbreaking idea, providing easy access to people from all walks of life. However, from an ethical standpoint, there are disparities in representation. Chris Alen Sula explains: "But even though large numbers of people contribute content online, not all spaces are representative or even appropriate for a given study. Each social media platform, for example, is known to have different demographic characteristics." In other words, social media is not wholly representative of the general population and may neglect to encompass certain groups of people, possibly skewing a researcher's results. In addition, obtaining information through social media constrains researchers to a certain type of information, ensuring some privacy and confidentiality but also neglecting some information. This does not take into consideration the sensitivity of online published information that may inadvertently reveal other data, compromising anonymity when combined with timestamps and geo-locations that are automatically embedded into posts (Sula).

Although certain sites, such as facebook, require their users to consent to a public data agreement of some sorts, it is questionable whether users actually read the form and understand the implications. There are also discrepancies within social media sites. For instance, a user posting on Twitter may expect certain privacies when direct messaging someone or writing in a private group. This creates another dilemma for researchers as they may be completely unaware of the sensitivity of certain information. Because direct access to the user may be limited, scientists cannot simply ask subjects about the provided data and intentions of this assumed public information may be lost. If I were talking to a close friend about my large work load or how I was worried that I failed an exam, I would not want this conversation used in a study, especially if my identity could be revealed. This goes beyond the issue of desire, but points to the issue of whether this conversation should be used by the researcher, most importantly without the person's knowledge.

In every other type of research study, informed consent is a requirement; without it, the study is simply unusable and invalid despite the results. Even harmless studies like surveys require this. As the Belmont Report depicts, this "moral requirement" stems from the respect and dignity of all humans (8). Additionally, informed consent allows human autonomy, based on the idea that people should be able to make knowledgeable decisions about their own lives. In terms of virtually obtained data, informed consent is somewhat ambiguous. Firstly, is informed consent even attainable from an online environment? Some believe that if it concerns public data, informed consent is unnecessary (Sugiura, Wiles & Pope). Others disagree, arguing that informed consent should be sought out and secured regardless. Obtaining this information may require researchers to post in online forums or contact persons individually. If this is too big of a burden for the researcher, perhaps the study should not be conducted in the first place. In other

words, researchers should be willinging to accept any necessary means in order to ethically acquire information. Informed consent is pinnacle to treating each human subject with respect, holding their privacy and authority over their own thoughts to the greatest priority.

Another point to keep in mind is the well-being of the vulnerable populations that may look towards online resources and groups to help them. "Vulnerable groups include young persons under the age of 18 years and those with intellectual disabilities, among others. It is difficult to know whether participants belong to vulnerable groups," due to limited information concerning the user's identity (Wolfinger). The question to ask is: would these people be at risk of harm if sensitive information was somehow released and used in a study? These risks may include ostracization from social groups, embarrassment and other psychological harms as well as self-harm and even suicide, issues that are even more catastrophic and prominent today due to online bullying. Most researchers agree that protecting this population of people is of utmost importance. However, there truly is no way to identify who this population encompasses when obtaining data from online resources.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of data collection through online platforms is the accuracy and truthfulness of the information. How are researchers guaranteed to obtain data that is correct without contacting the person directly? Many people use faulty information to obtain profiles. For instance, certain websites have a minimum age that users may forge simply to create an account. In addition, other people may hide behind profiles of of different genders, ages and races to gain access and trust from certain groups of people. As Leanne Townsend and Claire Wallace states: "people often shield their true identities on social media platforms and discussion forums." Therefore, if a researcher is conducting a study that is sensitive towards the background of participants, these inconsistencies pose a greater threat towards the findings. In

addition to demographic faults, people may post inaccurate information and thoughts online. Because of the social pressure of today's climate, many young people are intimidated to conform to standards and agree with political thoughts that are untrue to their real selves. This risk of possibly using fabricated or downright wrong information directly invalidates the conclusion of any study, violating the commitment to accuracy of researchers.

From one point of view, online research is a great opportunity to find data from a wide population. In addition, it provides researchers with the ability to reach people all over the world with their findings. However, because it is such a new and unprecedented practice, there needs to be rules implemented and discussion initiated about the ethics of data acquisition through Internet sources. Perhaps an entire committee dedicated to evaluating the methods of digital data collection in research is necessary to rectifying the method. People still deserve the integrity of privacy and autonomy of their personal information as they would receive in a regular, in person study. Delving deeper into this subject matter has certainly caused me to become more conscious of the content I post online. I definitely don't want any of my tweets to be evidence in a study unbeknownst to me.

Word Count: 1496

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