

National Centre for Research Methods
Methodological Review paper

Blurring the boundaries?

New social media, new social research:
Developing a network to explore the
issues faced by researchers negotiating the
new research landscape of online social
media platforms

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**National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) Networks for
Methodological Innovation**

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August 2013

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Abstract

This paper emerges from a programme of workshops and social media activities exploring the impact of social media on social science research funded by NCRM during 2012-13. The New Social Media, New Social Science? Network (NSMNSS) brought together an international network of interdisciplinary researchers to discuss the possibilities and challenges these new social media platforms and worlds pose for social science researchers.

The main questions we sought to address in our networked activities were:

- Should social science researchers embrace social media and, if we do, what are the implications for our methods and practice?
- How does social media research change our perceptions of ethical practice?
- Do new social media blur the boundaries between qualitative and quantitative research?

This paper focuses on: the issues and challenges posed for researchers working in the digital environment of social media; the ethical issues faced by researchers negotiating social media research methods; and, the lessons we learnt about establishing an international online community of practice.

1. Context - Are social media blurring the boundaries for researchers?

The growth of social media is one of the striking developments in internet usage in the last ten years. Researchers in all social science disciplines are exploring the potential for conducting research in new digital spaces (see for example: Back, Lury and Zimmer: 2012). New social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and a host of blogging and social networking sites have the potential to provide tools, platforms and substantive topics for social science research. A rapidly changing world of social media demands methodological adaptability and the use of these platforms for social science research (whether as a data collection tool or as the subject of substantive research) requires reflection on existing research paradigms, methodological approaches and ethical issues. Our New Social Media, New Social Science? (NSMNSS) network was set up to explore whether social media were blurring the boundaries between traditional methodological approaches, disciplines and conventional researcher and participant relationships.

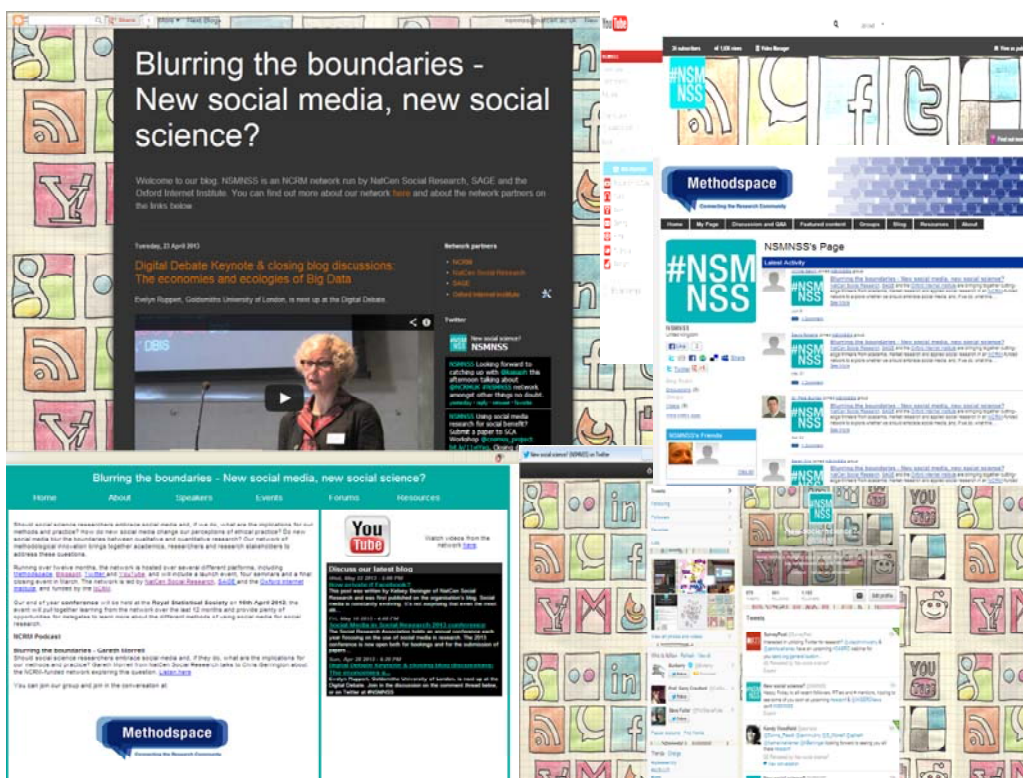
By bringing together researchers from different parts of the research world we have tried to break down barriers between disciplines and methods. The network has provided on and offline spaces where researchers can share their knowledge and practice, moving methodological understanding forward. The network for methodological innovation (NMI) was funded by ESRC for 12 months from May 2012-May 2013, though we are confident the network will persist beyond its initial funding. The network is led by a team at NatCen Social Research, working in collaboration with SAGE Publications and the Oxford Internet Institute. By the end of the first 12 months, we had 465 registered members located across the world representing over 20 academic disciplines. Membership of the network was balanced in favour of researchers with some experience of using social media for social research rather than those new to social media research as our aim was to stimulate methodological debate amongst practicing researchers¹. Fifty-nine per cent of NSMNSS members described their level of experience as 'expert' or 'intermediate' on registration. We also wanted to build a cross-disciplinary and cross-sectoral network; 75% of our members were based in HEIs but a further 25% came from other sectors in the applied research community. Online activities meant we could engage with a wide audience around the UK, Europe and the rest of the world. 65% of members are UK based with the remaining 35% coming from a range of countries in Europe, North America, Asia and the Pacific Rim.

¹ A second network of methodological innovation was funded in the same period which set out to provide capacity building events for researchers new to social media research see Digital Methods as Mainstream Methodology: Roberts, S. Hine, C. Moray, Y., Snee H., and Watson, H. (2013) NCRM

Over the course of the first year, we engaged in a lively programme of on and offline activities illustrated in Figure 1. These platforms encouraged and catalysed debate on the impact of social media on social science research methods and helped forge new links between research practitioners across different sectors of the research community. Activities ranged from full-day conference events to short hour long Twitter chats around themed topics. The agendas for all our activities were co-created with member input enabling us to focus on topics of high relevance to our members².

This paper focuses on two key themes arising from these network discussions: the issues and challenges posed for researchers working in the digital environment of social media and the ethical issues faced by researchers negotiating social media research methods. Finally, we reflect on the lessons we learnt about establishing an international online community of practice.

Figure 1 NSMNSS platforms



2. The methodological challenges of social media for researchers

Our network events showcased the diversity of research methods, approaches, tools and data being used in the production of 'social media research'. The technology underpinning social media networks is advancing at a fast rate; new platforms spring up and wither away, whilst

² See Woodfield, K., Morrell, G., Metzler, K. & Blank, G. (2013) NCRM for a more detailed discussion of network activities and outputs

others like Twitter continue to grow in popularity. At our opening event, Dr. Farida Vis evoked the 'wild west'³ when she described the current tapestry of social media methods being used by social researchers (Vis, 2012). Whilst such diversity can bring richness and experimentation, it also often leaves researchers searching for support and guidance. There is a striking rate of change at the heart of social media technology and the speed with which users communicate across platforms is equally rapid. For researchers more used to a reflective, slower pace in their research, the use of 'real time' data can be overwhelming and challenging. There is a growing body of literature on the methods of digital research and we do not intend to summarise that here, we have provided references to some key texts at the end of this paper. Instead, we review the themes that were important to our members as these provide a useful insight into the key methodological challenges facing researchers more generally. This discussion is not an exhaustive as our discussions were far ranging but it provides a flavour of network members concerns.

We have had many lively debates during the last year but what has been striking is an underlying uncertainty about the validity of digital and 'online' methods using social media and a lack of confidence amongst the research community about whether they are 'getting it right'. This concern with 'getting it right' was both methodological and ethical. Section 3 will look in detail at the ethical issues raised by our members but discussions about 'getting it right' have been equally lively around the issue of quality. Questions were raised about how to 'do' research using social media, and how to collect, analyse and represent social media in a way that will stand up to scrutiny against principles of validity and reliability . Yet what are appropriate principles here? There was concern amongst network members about whether technological advances in our ability to actually capture social media data were moving faster than our understanding of the data` or the epistemological challenges of this new field. As a research community, it still remains unclear whether we adequately understand the context within which social media data is created and consequently, what it means. There are many differing views about what constitutes quality in social media research and as a result researchers can feel tentative about the claims they can make from their data. More experienced network members encouraged social media researchers to be more confident and improve practice by being open and transparent about their methods and acknowledge that methods are still in the development phase.

The challenges faced by researchers in our network, and discussed throughout the year, are described here as a series of strengths and weaknesses, rather than insurmountable obstacles. Most of the challenges we encountered appeared particularly critical for researchers utilising quantitative approaches in their social media research. In part, this is a consequence of social

³ See the presentation here: [Hhttp://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vcpqyF9aPysH](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vcpqyF9aPysH)

media research being judged against the criteria of quantitative social research, in much the same way as qualitative research was judged against these criteria in its early days. It is difficult to see how social media research can be expected to meet the demands of criteria developed specifically for a different methodology conducted in a different research context and one of the main challenges for researchers will be to develop new criteria for judging the robustness and utility of social media research.

Social media also provides a rich setting for qualitative research. It has prompted a renewed emphasis on the use and understanding of images posted by users. It has also heralded the development of custom-built social networks to foster online research communities and the transference of ethnographic methods to online spaces in the form of 'netnography'. However, researchers' continued focus on understanding meaning and developing insight through the eyes of research participants means the methods used tend to be more consistent to, than divergent from, conventional qualitative approaches. In contrast, the rise of 'big data' from social media networks has fundamentally challenged some canons of quantitative research methods, particularly the need for randomised samples and survey research.

Strengths of social media data for researchers

The main benefits of social media data are derived from the ability to collect large volumes of user generated data relatively swiftly. The fact that much of the data is collected using automated methods also reduces the costs and the number of errors usually associated with selecting and recruiting samples for survey research.

Social media data are easy and inexpensive to collect, and as the data arrive in digital form they are also easy to prepare for statistical or qualitative analysis. Social media platforms offer a wide variety of data, including text, video, audio and images. Since data are already in digital form it is much easier to gather, store and manipulate, compared to paper. Social media platforms record the actual behaviour of their users (in relation to likes for examples, or connections made, links followed) and collect real-time communication in the form of tweets, e-mails, blogs or forum posts, meaning researchers are no longer reliant on self-reports, and the uncertain recall of research participants. In addition, since there are no interviewers there are no interviewer effects to contend with. Some of our network members argue this, in and of itself, improves reliability and simplifies certain measurement issues.

This ease of collection means that researchers can often draw down data from entire populations. An entire population of tweets, email messages or Wikipedia edits can be collected with no sampling required (between a certain date range for example, or for all users of a social

networking site on a particular day). There are fewer issues of biased respondent selection or assembling a sampling frame when drawing down the data from entire populations, although the overall bias of the social media user universe remains problematic. A large population means that even small subgroups can be studied. Since data collection is simple, researchers can often collect longitudinal data (at least over periods of days, weeks or months). This can improve researchers' opportunities to track and detect certain causal processes.

In many cases where social media forums are in the public domain their data can be gathered without users being consciously aware they are being observed or their data drawn down for research purposes. This raises real ethical issues, discussed in more detail below, but researchers can be confident that subjects were not changing their behaviours because they were taking part in a research study! However, as we note below, there is a growing body of research on how similar or dissimilar users' attitudes, beliefs and behaviours are on and offline that may of itself be problematic for research validity (Suler, 2004).

The growth of social media means it is now easier for researchers to access participants. There are multiple channels for communicating with participants and if required, these populations of users can then be sampled via social media and then asked questions online using well-established survey techniques. There are particular benefits for researchers wanting to explore international or cross-cultural perspectives or beliefs as online social networks can allow researchers to cross-geographical boundaries in a cost-effective, timely fashion. Similarly, researchers interested in marginalised groups, or those whose physical access to conventional research spaces are limited, described finding the tracing of hard-to-find or hard-to-access populations easier using social media tools and platforms.

The low cost and relatively open access to social media forums and social media data to date (although Twitter has started to rollback free access to its data) provides the potential for truly enormous samples to be drawn with sample sizes in the millions. Recent work on the English riots in 2011 worked with a corpus of 2.6 million tweets⁴. Social network analysis conducted across millions of users can provide rich understanding of how influence and power are exerted in the online world, sentiment analysis can tell us about beliefs and feelings on a global scale.

So why, in the face of these benefits, did researchers express uncertainty about the methods they were using or the value of social media research compared to conventional offline research methods? We'll now turn to some of the key weaknesses of social media data for social research.

⁴ See <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/dec/05/reading-the-riots-methodology-explained>

Disadvantages of social media data for researchers

For social researchers a solid, trustworthy sample frame is one of the bedrocks of robust research. Sampling frames are often impossible to obtain when using social media for research. Except in certain limited circumstances, such as the use of enterprise social networking platforms behind firewalls, it is impossible to access a definitive list of email addresses, web pages, Tweets, etc. This means that an unbiased sample is out of reach, most samples of social media users are some form of convenience sample. A key issue is how users of social media compare to the general population. Since only about 50-60% of the British population use social media, a large part of the population will never be included in a social media drawn sample. Your position on how limiting this is to the quality of your research will depend on how you approach the 'digital Vs non-digital' debate. Some of our members argue this is less important than first assumed. They contend that if you are researching the world of social media your samples should only need to reflect and represent the population of social media users not some tentative approximation of the general population. This obviously then affects how and what types of wider inference you can draw. Researchers are grappling with some real ontological issues as they explore social media. Readers keen to explore this discussion at greater length can access Professor Richard Rogers' keynote speech⁵ (Rogers, 2012) which expertly captured these ongoing and important philosophical questions.

There are equally important problems when gathering data on whole populations. To begin with, a researcher may have data on an entire population but it may not be a very interesting population (like the population of Twitter users). Many researchers have collected social media datasets because they are easy to collect, not because they are necessarily answering well formed research questions. Compounding this issue is that fact that researchers often know little about the population. In particular, they do not know basic demographic information like age, gender, education or marital status of participants. Since these have an important influence on behaviour, researchers may suffer a major loss of ability to understand their results. Some of the more innovative social media research currently being undertaking, is addressing exactly this problem. Luke Sloan and colleagues at COSMOS are exploring how existing traditional survey or administrative data sets can be used with social media data to improve the insights we can glean from both types of data.

Some other things, however, are simply unobservable. Although researchers can observe social media behaviour directly, the same behaviour can have very different meanings in different contexts and to different users and is often difficult to infer what the actual meaning is for social

⁵ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U1-uYrJAdFEH>

media users. Attitudes are also unobservable unless directly expressed. Since both meaning and attitudes exert a major influence on behaviour, not knowing these will weaken prediction and researchers will be unable to discount alternative explanations for behaviour. This is where combining qualitative and quantitative approaches can have real value in adding to our understanding of the motivations and beliefs of populations using social media.

On a practical level, some of our network members were struggling with the constant stream of social media data, finding it difficult to keep pace with their participants as they moved on in their conversations and discussions. Digital overwhelm might become counter-productive to reflective social science if researchers are not skilled at managing data flows. Similarly, gathering massive datasets requires a computing power outside of the grasp of many independent researchers or students. The increasing emphasis on 'big data' runs the risk of access to datasets being increasingly concentrated in the hands of a tiny minority of researchers and organisations. An alternative perspective sees this as an opportunity for researchers to come together in creative, cross-disciplinary collaborations. Either way, social researchers will need to find ways of convincing those who own social media sites about the merits of extending, or at least continuing, some freely accessible datasets. The politics of social media research will become an increasingly important agenda for social scientists to engage with.

Despite the strengths that social media offer in terms of providing an accessible platform for some marginalised groups, other hard-to-reach populations like the elderly, the poor and those with limited literacy remain more difficult to reach online.

Conclusions – Future directions for social media research

'Big' data from social media sources may contain many cases but often that quantitative data is shallow and lacking in important features we have come to expect in our quantitative research samples whether collected from surveys or administrative data sources. In contrast, qualitative data gathered using social media networks and platforms can reach a depth and richness more akin to that produced during offline research. The increasing ways in which social media allows researchers to contact and communicate with participants offers us new and exciting opportunities for developing participatory research models, real-time and longer term relationships with participants which might provide richer, deeper insights into the questions we are exploring.

There is much more social media data in our future. It is too easy to collect and too easy to analyse for it to be ignored by researchers. Nevertheless, good quality research has always been a dialogue between ideas and evidence. As we think about these new data, we need to pay

attention to the other half of the dialogue: the ideas and the questions we are posing. Making the best use of this new field of social research will require social scientists to really understand the social media world from its users' perspectives, develop a sound epistemology and select research questions that are appropriate for the specific context and data produced in that universe. Dr Evelyn Ruppert expanded upon this challenge in her address to our year-end conference where she argued the research community needs to both explore and understand the economies and ecologies of 'big data'⁶ (Ruppert,2013).

Finally, social media research poses a range of ethical dilemmas for researchers; the development of a set of commonly agreed ethical practice is contentious and under-discussed in existing guidance. We turn to this issue in detail in Section 3.

3. Ethical practice and social media research

Throughout the activities that took place in the first year of the network, one topic consistently rose to the surface in discussions: the ethics of social media research. The fast changing and virtual nature of social media research caused network members to consider the extent to which existing ethical principles and guidelines can possibly apply in this new discipline. They also reflected on whether those forging ahead with technical developments have really paused sufficiently to consider the ethics of what they are doing. As has been urged elsewhere, members were keen to 'humanise' the virtual and ensure we start from the position that most social media data of interest springs from human beings (Markham and Buchanan 2012). More specifically, these concerns were raised in relation to all stages of the research process, from perspectives of students and experienced researchers, and irrespective of the research method being adopted. Since the network was international and multidisciplinary, discussions of research ethics also drew on varied cultural viewpoints, regulatory frameworks, and disciplinary expectations.

This section reviews the discussions from this multifaceted year-long dialogue, identifying common emerging themes and situating these within the limited literature available on the subject. It concludes by presenting findings from a project that emerged directly out of the network: a survey of network members views and concerns about ethics and a review of existing guidelines by NSMNSS member, Dr Janet Salmons.

Ethical themes

The themes from our network discussions reflect a concern with the application of general ethical principles as well as issues specific to the particular research opportunities that social media

⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hIFD1I8zJCoH>

presents. The discussions focused on four areas: informed consent; confidentiality/anonymity; the role and safety of the researcher; and the context and politics of the specific research setting/platform.

Informed consent

The principle of informed consent is one all social researchers should give consideration to irrespective of method. It is given considerable prominence in guidelines of the ESRC, GSR, and industry bodies for social and market research in the UK and internationally. In social media research, we are typically (though not always, see below) dealing with naturally occurring data rather than generated data. As a result, much of the discussion generated by the network was concerned with if this data and the spaces it occupies should be seen as public or private and whether informed consent needed to be sought retrospectively (Miller 2012). There are certainly studies where this has not been the case, where the assumption is that any data that is freely accessible (for example, tweets, open access Facebook pages and other statement on public forums) can be used for research. Authors of such studies have been candid within the network discussion about their own concerns of the ethics of those pieces of work (Vis 2012). The argument here is that while these studies were legal, as researchers our practice needs to reflect more than a simple consideration of the bounds of existing legislation.

Network members and existing literature in the field identify two reasons for this, both of which require us to consider the social media users' perspective. Firstly, when people tweet about a topical issue, they may have no expectation that this would ever be used for research. In particular, that it could then be compiled along with other tweets and extrapolated personal information. Such considerations are not likely to be at the forefront of many social media users' minds nor may they be aware that such data linkage is technically possible. Secondly, while certain social media are publicly accessible, this may not square with users' perceptions (Markham and Buchanan 2012). Even on open access Twitter, the content of users' tweets may actually only be aimed at followers, who in turn could simply be a small group of family and friends. Of course, there is a counter argument based on the assumption of consent: to use Twitter, users have to agree to the site's terms and conditions, which make clear that their tweets are publicly accessible and owned by the company. However, as a significant proportion of users do not read terms and conditions this cannot really be considered informed consent in the way understood by researchers (British Psychological Society 2008). We tested this assumption at one event by asking network members to raise their hands if they read the terms and conditions of the social media platforms they used, very few hands rose even in that room of experienced social media researchers!

Confidentiality and anonymity

The twin principles of confidentiality and anonymity are prominent elements of social research ethical guidelines. The extent to which it is possible for social media research to protect confidentiality and anonymity appears to depend upon the methods being used to collect, analyse and display the data. For aggregate level analysis of Facebook accounts for example, both concepts are possible to protect. In the same way that researchers present aggregate rather than individual level accounts of survey data sets, so social media researchers are able to report on attitudinal trends, emergent themes discussed in relation to a particular topic and provide an insight into the prevalence of views or demographics for a particular social media platform.

The picture becomes more complicated when data is analysed at an individual level and subsequently presented as such. The use of quotations in traditional qualitative research is commonplace, where researchers ensure that verbatim text taken from an interview transcript for example does not make the research participant identifiable. A unique problem of using publicly accessible digital data for research is that it is forever traceable (Roberts, 2012). This issue needs to receive greater consideration in association with users' perceptions and expectations. The content of a tweet may have only been for the consumption of friends and family, yet by including that tweet in a research report it may be possible that it receives a far wider audience than was ever intended. As a result of this, some network members argued that we need to consider carefully the impact of our reporting of verbatim social media data (Vis 2012; see also Flicker et al 2004).

It is also worth considering, however, evidence that suggests perceptions may differ among different types of social media user. At our seminars on the ethics and quality of social media research we heard from members about the different conceptions of privacy amongst young people on social media sites. Privacy is, of course, a social construct and subjectively defined (Boyd and Marwick 2011; Walther 2002), which makes it unwise for researchers to make any assumptions about what users' views might be. What evidence there is on this suggests that young people are more relaxed about privacy on sites like Facebook, perhaps because they are more perceptive about privacy settings. Studies have also found that as a result these users are positive about their data being used for research (Moreno 2012). There is a paucity of information about users' expectations about the use of their social media data; a group of network members at NatCen Social Research are currently conducting primary research to explore these issues in more depth.

The role of the researcher

A third issue arising in relation to various stages of the research process was the role of the researcher and blurring of the lines between the researchers and those researched. This

discussion focused on two main issues: researcher identity and researcher safety. The first issue was particularly acute for researchers gathering data and making connections in forum spaces. Some were uncertain about when it is appropriate to collect data without disclosing their identities as researchers. This reflects the earlier distinction drawn between naturally-occurring social media data and data that is generated by a researcher's intervention. For some it was clearly more important for a researcher to make themselves and their intentions known (in advance) when they contribute to the generation of the data by participating in forums to guide and shape the conversation or seeking answers to specific questions for example. In the literature and in guidelines that address this issue, 'lurking' or posing as a non-researcher is never seen as acceptable (MRS 2010). It has been seen as equivalent to 'purposely eavesdropping in a public place' (Moreno 2008). Others refer back to the principle of informed consent and suggest that researchers should also make reasonable attempts to inform Twitter users that the research is taking place. However, given that much Twitter research involves retrospective analysis of tweets around a particular issue, this may not always be possible in advance.

A second, related issue concerns the safety of the researcher. Again, this should always be a concern for social researchers; however, there are specific issues at play in social media research. Network members spoke from experience that researchers need to consider the extent to which they want to actively involve themselves in an online discussion, particularly if they themselves have an active social media presence. Researchers may become victims to trolls and online abuse and they may choose to separate their 'researcher' persona from their personal persona in an attempt to protect the boundaries between their professional and personal lives. Nevertheless, it is relatively easy for a practiced user of digital platforms to put together data from various sources and link two profiles. The development of more prolonged contact with participants through online research communities also poses challenges for researchers who are striving to maintain professional boundaries over a longer contact period. On all these issues researchers newer to the field argued there was a lack of good practical guidance for how to conduct research safely and ethically online. They also identified a lack of training and support around ethical practice for doctoral students in universities.

Research setting or platform

Questions about the research setting or platform cut across and frame some of the ethical issues already discussed. Features of social media sites are largely determined by commercial entities, therefore these online spaces are not neutral (Whalley, 2012). The diverse ways people interact using social media (with written text, recorded audio, images or video) mean different types of data could be collected — each with its own ethical dilemmas. This raised a series of questions throughout the year:

- Given the complex nature of social media sites, how does one distinguish between the public and the private?
- Does access by membership or special log-in accounts mean the site is private?
- Might there be both public and private spaces in the same social media site?
- Are datasets (such as collected health records) generated for other purposes public or private information?
- The questions of identity, privacy and setting also have implications for the requirements for, and nature of informed consent.

A review of existing ethical guidelines

Network members, particularly those newer to the field, were struggling with knowing where to turn for guidance when making ethical research decisions. To explore this issue further we decided to shed some light on what people currently do and what the existing ethical guidelines have to say about social media research. Network member Dr Janet Salmons conducted a short survey of network members and an extensive review of available ethical guidelines and frameworks. This research will be published in autumn 2013 on the NSMNSS website (Salmons 2013 forthcoming); below is a brief summary of the emerging findings.

For our members, the guidelines from their disciplines, professional association and/or academic institution were highly respected—but largely found to be less than adequate in respect of social media research. Comments included:

There is a lack of guidance from both institution and discipline-- too far behind the changes in technology and the changing expectations of both the researchers and the researched.

I find/get conflicting advice which causes confusion.

One member described how “*we are left to our own devices,*” a viewpoint shared by nearly half of respondents who choose “*going by your own instincts and values about what is good ethical practice*” almost twice as often as they choose “*following guidelines from faculty or research supervisor*” when faced with ethical decisions. Indeed, many noted a need for e-research ethics training for ethics review boards, research supervisors and other decision-makers who approve study designs, scrutinise grant funding or oversee the publication of research results.

We did not seek to find definitive answers to all of these ethical questions or to resolve all the ethical challenges facing researchers, especially as many of these issue are far from resolved even in conventional research approaches. The opportunities for dialogue did allow for a rich exchange across a far-reaching group of social media researchers. The emergent themes suggest

a need for more thoughtful discussion about ethical research in the digital age. As one questionnaire respondent commented, *'Multi-disciplinary, multi-method approaches to research ethics are needed, while respecting the influence of disciplinary codes and work of associations. Ongoing development is needed for approaches that evolve with the changes in technology and usage.'* This suggests that guidance and open publication and discussion of ethical dilemmas is required, rather than rigid guidelines that would struggle to remain appropriate for the myriad methodological approaches to social media research.

Finally, it is also important to consider how closely issues of ethics overlap with issues of quality.

Conducting research ethically has implications for quality; equally quality in research demands ethical practice. Considering some of the other methodological and reputational challenges research with social media may also face it is going to be crucial for researchers using social media data to think ethically and publish methods transparently to improve and maintain the quality and credibility of social media research in the future.

4. The value of a community of practice in shifting areas of methodological innovation, challenges and opportunities

This section explains how we established our network's online presence and the challenges we faced in using multiple social media platforms to maintain and deepen links with members of our network throughout the year. We conclude with some key learning for others attempting to establish an on and offline network and the critical importance of interdisciplinary communities of practice to methodological innovation.

Networks of methodological innovation as communities of practice

"Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." (Etienne Wenger: 2007)

Communities of practice utilise the power of social and experiential learning to develop shared skills, cultures and values; new practices; alternative models of thinking and novel approaches to persistent challenges. They are widely used in health and social care domains for continuing professional development and so are ideally suited to the goals of network of methodological innovation that seeks to engage its members in shared learning and knowledge exchange. Often, communities of practice employ conventional face-to-face learning events and activities such as peer learning sets and seminars to share ideas and good practice.

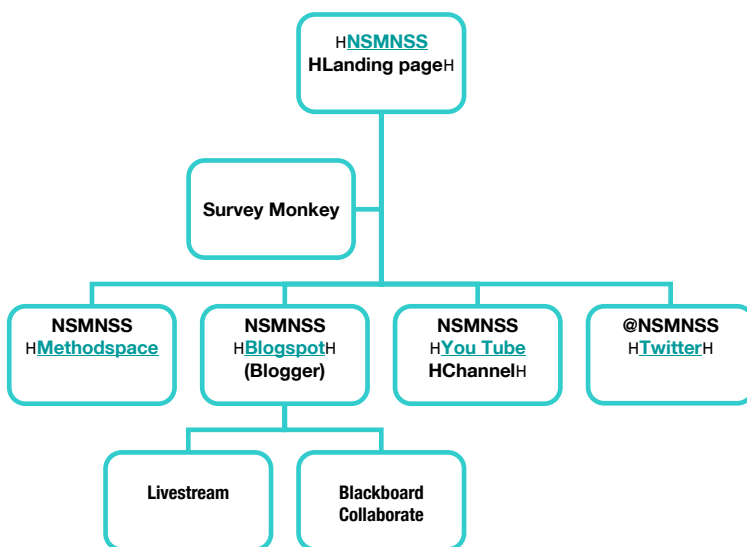
The growth of social networks and social media have extended the arena for communities of practice, social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Ning and Wordpress have all been used

to support ongoing communities of practice in a range of disciplines. Members participate in both synchronous and asynchronous discussions of their practice, sharing ideas, challenging established models of working, tackling persistent issues and learning new approaches and techniques from one another. Sometimes these communities of practice are self-forming and sustaining. Others, like our network, are formally established and maintained through active facilitation. Building a visually engaging, easy to use platform is important for developing an online community, but the content, connections and community need the active involvement of ‘community gardeners’ or ‘facilitators’ to ensure engagement is sustained.

Our experience of building and maintaining an online community for our network was deeply satisfying and our online presence was critical to keeping network discussions moving, engaging participants who could not attend the face-to-face events and to building a network that drew in researchers from around the world.

Creating a digital presence

Diagram 1: Our digital presence



We chose a number of platforms at the outset of the project to help publicise the network, maintain links with network members and to act as a digital depository for network output. These were chosen pragmatically to provide a blend of different types of forums as we knew that our members would vary in their familiarity with different sites.

The platforms were:

- **A group page on Methodspace⁷:** We hoped that, through Methodspace, we could create a space for researchers to engage with the resources the network produced, debate key issues, ask questions and connect with each other. A group was set up

⁷ Methodspace is a multidimensional online network for the community of researchers, from students to professors, engaged in research methods. Sponsored by SAGE, a leading publisher of books and journals in research methods, the site is created for students and researchers to network and share research, resources and debates. Since launching in 2009, Methodspace has built a member base of over 15,000 members.

(<http://www.methodspace.com/groups/nsmnss>) on the site and network members were encouraged to join when they signed up for the network.

- **Blog hosted on blogger:** A blog (<http://nsmnss.blogspot.co.uk/>) was set up to host guest posts from event speakers and provide more information about network events.
- **Twitter account:** A Twitter account @NSMNSS (<https://twitter.com/NSMNSS>) was created to promote the network amongst individuals and groups on Twitter. We used this account to promote the network through live tweeting during events and hosting Twitter chats. The account now has over 1,200 followers.
- **YouTube:** An account on YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/user/NSMNSS>) was set up to host videos from the launch event, knowledge exchange event and the closing event.
- **Blackboard Collaborate:** Blackboard Collaborate is a VLE for running online seminars & lectures with participants and we used it several times during our programme of events.
- **Landing page:** Because NSMNSS was based across several platforms, a landing page (<http://www.natcen.ac.uk/nsmnss/>) was created to tie together all of the other platforms and provide signposting to the range of resources available.

Maintaining and promoting the network

A key element of the network's presence on digital platforms was maintaining and promoting NSMNSS between face-to-face events. This involved a combination of day-to-day activity online and a series of digital events hosted across the different platforms over the twelve months of the network.

Using Twitter to build and engage the network

The role of the Twitter account developed over the life of the network – from a platform for tweeting about NSMNSS events it became an active hub of the network. Live tweeting during face-to-face to events was used to help engage with members not able to attend events. Followers were also encouraged to ask questions on Twitter during events, which were then relayed to speakers. Between events the Twitter account was used to follow up contacts made during events, tweet relevant information and resources and host Twitter chats.

Twitter chats are hour long Q&A style discussions held on Twitter around several key questions on a theme specified in advance. An agenda was created for each Twitter chat, with between three and four questions focused on the issue being addressed by our next scheduled seminar

used to structure the chat. Twitter chats were publicised in advance via the Twitter account and NSMNSS blog, with agendas and the key questions posted in advance on the blog. Tweets during the Twitter chats included the hashtag '#NSMNSS' - this meant that all tweets would show up on a single stream, allowing people to follow the conversation. Because each tweet was tagged with '#NSMNSS' it meant that anyone reading a participant's Twitter stream could easily join or catch up on a Twitter chat. In addition, the transcripts of Twitter chats were captured and posted on the blog and on the Methodspace forums.

Blogging

Initially the blog was used only to host guest posts by event speakers and highlight upcoming events. As the network developed, the blog became a key resource to host network member's guest posts alongside event speaker's posts, advertise upcoming events, and report on key issues that emerged out of our knowledge exchange sessions and Twitter chats.

Methodspace forum

The Methodspace group featured a web forum for network members and NSMNSS team members to start topics and discuss different issues raised through the network. Initially posts by guest speakers on the blog were used to try to stimulate discussion, with further content generated by Twitter chats and issues arising during the seminars then used to start discussions with network members. It was hoped that the forum would provide a space for network members to join and contribute to topics. As the network progressed participation on the forum dropped off with the blog and Twitter account becoming the main hubs of interaction for the network.

You Tube

You Tube was used to host videos from the face-to-face events. It did not play a main role in promoting the network, although was critical in providing a rich multi media set of resources for our membership.

The Digital Debates

Following the final face-to-face event, our blog was used to host a live *digital debate* consisting of a series of pre-recorded videos and presentations that were released over the course of half a day at a designated time onto the NSMNSS blog. The goal was to enable a much broader group to participate in discussions around the conference. The event was publicised beforehand using the NSMNSS social media channels, with attendees asked to register using Eventbrite. An agenda was produced that would mirror the in-person conference which took place a week earlier and blog posts scheduled to go live at these times. There were slots allocated for informal 'live

chatting' via the comments threads on the blog, and similarly the comments thread was active for each new "session" as it aired, allowing virtual attendees to chat in real time as they watched the pre-recorded videos.

Alongside the recordings, virtual posters were commissioned. Virtual posters take the traditional poster presentation beyond the limitations of a coffee break or brief poster session to a bigger audience and wider debate online. The effect of launching each presentation at an allocated time was to create the atmosphere of a live-streamed event.

Key learning

This section highlights the key learning from the digital presence of the network – generating content, communicating across platforms, choosing the right number of platforms, and choosing the right platform for events. Key to the network's digital presence was the importance of **generating regular content** to promote discussion so that we could encourage engagement with the network. This was particularly important between face-to-face events to help fill the 'gap' in direct engagement. Our process of managing this period developed over the lifetime of the network into a set pattern:



This process helped ensure we could produce a steady output of blog posts, Twitter chats and tweets so that we could continually engage with members over the lifetime of the network.

Most guidance on running online communities cautions against using multiple platforms which run the risk of confusing users and worse, losing users as they attempt to navigate between the different platforms.

We worked hard to ensure that the different platforms 'spoke' to each other and had a very specific role. In practice, this meant using Twitter to publicise new blog posts, or using the network blog to promote events and Twitter chats, or using the forum on Methodspace to

encourage members to debate blog posts. By doing this, it meant that we were able to engage with members who might only use a single platform and keep the platforms the network was operating across updated on a regular basis.

However, as the network developed it became clear that it was operating across too many platforms. The landing page was initially designed to be a window into the different platforms the network was using. Whilst it was initially useful to tie together the platforms, as the network developed, network activity and membership crystallised around the Twitter account and the blog, and our use of the landing page tailed off.

In addition, despite featuring on the homepage and repeated efforts to attract members, there are only 79 members of the Methodspace group compared to 465 in the network. In part, our experience of using Methodspace for the network was hampered by the limitations of the NING platform on which Methodspace is built⁸. These limitations include: a poor search functionality, poor tagging and labelling of content, limited functionality within groups to allow blogs and videos to be curated and an inability for members to export or curate content to other platforms.

Our use of Blackboard Collaborate was disappointing, as it requires a log in and triggers a software download on the first time of use it did not work for all members who tried to use it. For those in organisations with tight information security protocols participation was impossible as their IT policies denied the download scripts from running. We used Blackboard on several occasions to stream a speaker from overseas into our face-to-face workshops and this worked well. There is also the issue of delegate capability at working in the online space, encouraging good debate and discussion requires a high-level of online facilitation skills. We did achieve this at all the sessions but it was not as straightforward as we had imagined. We had hoped to live stream the opening and closing conferences using Blackboard Collaborate platform but practically the size of the presentation window provided in Blackboard for live casting and the complexity of getting good audio feeds meant we opted for an alternative route. We were able to arrange live streaming from a commercial company and this worked well on the day although there were issues with the venue's bandwidth early in the session which led to the live stream being interrupted during the first session. The bandwidth issue and a lack of expertise at the venue for the closing event meant we chose to video the speaker presentations and make these available after the event. Whilst live streaming can be very effective, when a third of your membership is outside of the UK you need to be mindful of time zone differences. We ran our

⁸ SAGE are currently reviewing the use of NING for their Methodspace platform with an eventual goal of moving the forum to a more intuitive, flexible platform.

Digital Debates, online seminars & Twitter chats in the afternoon GMT to encourage participation from members in other time zones.

It is also important to select the right digital platform for each different type of digital activity. For example, using Twitter for online chats, rather than the forum on Methodspace, meant that the network could both engage in real time with network members and promote the network to wider groups through the use of the #NSMNSS hashtag in the Twitter chats. In comparison, Blogger was used to host the digital debate after the final live event. The main limitations of using Blogger to host events of this nature was that the platform would not allow uploads of multimedia such as video. Wordpress would be a better platform for a digital event which required the use of more than blog posts. We found a workaround and embedded videos from a Youtube channel instead. Similarly, it was only during the event that we realised the comments thread was not dynamic and needed to be refreshed to view new comments. These types of minor differences between platforms can have a big impact on the success of online events.

In summary, Blackboard was a slightly too complex package for our needs and we would recommend using a straightforward webinar tool (such as Webex, GoToMeeting) for future online workshops. As technology has evolved more informal knowledge exchange can now be easily hosted through Google Hangouts. Our most used platforms for knowledge exchange and discussion were Twitter and Blogger. If future networks are planning to run online activity our recommendation would be that where possible it is preferable to use open access platforms which do not require a log-in and password, or if they do they are likely to be platforms which people will already be using. The more open access the platform the better for general engagement and access to NMI activities and resources. We would prune the number of platforms we used if running another network, although there were benefits to introducing members to a range of different social media platforms as part of the learning from participating in the network. If we were developing a new network, we would choose a single flexible blogging platform, like Blogger or Wordpress and host the main event information, resources and blog posts on a single site. Twitter would remain a separate but linked account.

Twitter can add a great deal of added value in keeping your main community in touch with a wider network, provide energy and momentum to flagging debates and Twitter is an effective vehicle for network promotion providing a reliable channel for engaging others in the network. During the course of the network we also ran a joint Twitter chat with @socphd a relatively new social research hub for PhD students, by co-hosting a Twitter chat we were able to engage with a larger group of postdoctoral students, sharing links, resources and network knowledge with them.

5. Conclusion: Social Media - Blurring the boundaries?

We are still at the start of our journey into the methodology of social media research, despite research being undertaken on these platforms for over a decade. We have yet to agree a coherent set of epistemological or ethical frameworks for social media research. In fact, some participants argue this is a positive, allowing researchers fluidity and freedom in the methods and approaches they adopt, reacting to what is a fast-changing research environment.

There is a definite sense that the boundaries are being blurred between on and offline research methods; researchers & participants; qualitative and quantitative methods; and, between researchers working in a range of disciplines from Computational Science to Anthropology. Our network showed time and time again that there was real value and an increasing need for projects utilizing social media to cross disciplinary and methodological divides. What is clear is that the guidelines, epistemologies and methods of conventional research cannot simply be transplanted to the world of social media without careful scrutiny and adaptation.

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