Cluster Conversation: Feminist Internet Research Ethics edited by Kristi McDuffie and Melissa Ames

Cluster Editors' Introduction: Defining A Feminist Approach to Internet Research Ethics (Again)

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Abstract: This introduction presents several norms that have emerged through Internet research discussions over the past years and outlines best practices as a set of agreed upon norms that primarily emerge in writing studies, rhetorical theory, and feminist media studies, to set a foundation for scholars doing related work. These practices can be used concurrently with heuristics that are outlined by the Association of Internet Researchers and scholars such as Buck and Ralston. As opposed to these heuristics, which are questions that researchers can use to guide their decision-making on particular projects, this list is meant to orient researchers toward current thinking in feminist Internet research ethics.

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the Composition Classroom (2018), and the Computers & Writing Proceedings (2018); and articles in The Journal of Dracula Studies (2011), The Women and Popular Culture Encyclopedia (2012), The High School Journal (2013), The Journal of Popular Culture (2014), Feminist Media Studies (2017), Pedagogy (2017), and First Monday (2021).

keywords: ethic of care, feminist research methods, Internet research ethics, mentorship, positionality

Entering the Conversation

In 2018, Kristi and Melissa submitted a research article to a feminist media journal. We thought that our study on live tweets accompanying the 2017 Women's March on Washington was an exigent analysis of affect in hashtag feminism. However, we received a scalding review that criticized our research ethics. Our anonymous reviewer was appalled that we included tweeted images in our analyzed findings and thus did not protect our study participants. We were surprised and hurt; we were trained in research methods and included images to allow the feminist activists to represent themselves in their own words. But we swallowed our pride and dug deeper into Internet research ethics. Upon talking with other scholars and reading interdisciplinary research, it was clear why we were confused. Standards varied across disciplines and institutions. Articles modeled different practices throughout publication venues. Ultimately we published our piece in another journal (McDuffie and Ames) with greater protections on images, using suggestions outlined by Amy Bruckman, and this experience inspired us to create more conversations around Internet research ethics in order to improve other scholars' experiences. This cluster conversation therefore presents a variety of approaches to Internet research ethics through a feminist lens, beginning with this introductory piece that outlines best practices in feminist Internet research ethics.

After this introduction, our cluster conversation continues with a piece by Cam Cavaliere and Leigh Gruwell, "Developing a Feminist Mentorship Praxis for Digital Aggression Research," which serves as a model for the type of mentorship we are advocating for. In this article, both the mentor and mentee address the challenges that digital aggression research poses to researcher safety and offer suggestions for feminist mentorship practices to enhance our emotional and physical well-being.

Next, in "Researching on the Intersectional Internet: Slow Coding as Humanistic Recovery," Wilfredo Flores draws attention to the problematic colonial conditions of traditional research practices and offers a revised methodology that allows for more care when working with marginalized communities. Flores details a strategy called slow coding, a multilayered process that allows more space for antiracist analytic strategies to be drawn upon throughout the research process.

The next three pieces in this cluster conversation build on Amber Buck and Devon Ralston's "Heuristic for Reflective Research/Data Collection" by extending the framework to new spaces or mediums to continue challenging ourselves as ethical researchers of online spaces,

communities, and texts. Hannah Taylor's contribution, "Beyond Text: Ethical Considerations for Visual Online Platforms," discusses her research experiences with two image-based social media projects (the online conference *Braving Body Shame* and the sexual health education Instagram page The Vulva Gallery) in order to reflect on her own research practices and demonstrate a feminist research ethic of self-reflexivity. In "Towards Best Practices for Podcasting in Rhetoric and Composition," Charles Woods and Devon Fitzgerald Ralston examine the research methods of re:verb: *A Podcast about Politics, Culture, and Language in Action podcast*. They offer guidance towards best practices based on feminist principles and methods for podcasters podcasting in rhetoric and composition. In the final work in this triad, "A Private Conversation in a Public Place: The Ethics of Studying 'Virtual Support Groups' Now," Nora Augustine explicates ethical quandaries that arose from one agency's attempts to implement a Zoom-based confidentiality policy in its support groups during Covid-19, showing how rapid uptake of this platform introduced new ethical conflicts. Combining the apparent privacy of face-to-face group meetings with the ambiguous publicness of online communication, she argues that Zoom support groups illustrate the extent to which our understandings of "virtual support groups" have changed since scholars first started researching human subjects on the Internet—and therefore how much our ethical considerations must change, too.

Our cluster conversation closes full circle with a piece that returns to traditional mentorship – but from the very initial stages: the classroom. Gabriella Wilson's "Teaching Digital Feminist Research Methods: Polluted Digital Landscapes and Care-ful Pedagogies" explores how instructors can use feminist methodologies in teaching digital research methods, especially in an era of contaminated rhetoric and disinformation. This piece discusses pedagogical best practices and approaches to teaching ethical digital feminist research methods in the first-year composition classroom and beyond.

Best Practices in Feminist Internet Research Ethics

To provide a foundation for these thoughtful pieces interrogating research ethics from a feminist perspective, we present several norms that have emerged through Internet research discussions over the past years. It has been difficult to identify consensus within Internet research ethics because online practices (and the study thereof) remain dynamic spaces for legal, business, academic, and personal jurisdictions. Furthermore, different disciplines approach Internet research ethics from various epistemological stances. Also contributing to a lack of consensus is the delay of institutions, such as IRB and graduate schools, in updating to keep up with contemporary practices in online research. Therefore, we take this space to outline best practices as a set of agreed upon norms that primarily emerge in writing studies, rhetorical theory, and feminist media studies, to set a foundation for scholars doing related work. These practices can be used concurrently with heuristics that are outlined by the Association of Internet Researchers (Ess and AoIR; franzke et al.; Markham and Buchanan) and scholars such as Buck and Ralston. As opposed to

these heuristics which are questions that researchers can use to guide their decision-making on particular projects, this list is meant to orient researchers toward current thinking in feminist Internet research ethics.

IRBs Provide Insufficient Guidance for Internet Research

Although Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) have governed academic research for decades–along with legal concerns like copyright, FERPA, and HIPAA–IRBs provide insufficient guidance for Internet research. Elizabeth Buchanan, for example, explains that her early inquiries into Internet research ethics "problematized standard notions of respect for persons, justice, and beneficence"; because these principles were originally based on a biomedical model of research, they "do not transfer easily to internet research" (Buchanan et al. 271-272). IRBs have largely been concerned with physical and emotional harm that arrives through interactive and private information-based research, and thus have not taken ownership of research using public data online. Such research is either treated as exempt or waived.

The feminist Internet research community, however, demands a higher standard. Amber Buck and Devon Ralston explain that sharing "social media data (public or not) outside of its originally shared context may bring with it potential problems," especially for communities of color (3). Rosemary Clark-Parsons similarly claims that "just because a user consented to publishing a message publicly on Twitter does not necessarily mean they have consented to having that message published in other contexts, such as an academic journal or news story" (Buchanan et al. 266-267). Research asking online users about their preferences supports these findings: James M. Hudson and Amy Bruckman found that "individuals in online environments such as chatrooms generally do not approve of being studied without their consent" (Hudson and Bruckman 135).

Despite this knowledge, there is no easy way to implement this advice; it is often impractical to obtain informed consent in online environments (Hudson and Bruckman 135). Implementing feminist principles of care and situated knowledge (franzke et al. 66-67) will help researchers balance their research goals with the personal agency (Clark-Parsons in Buchanan et al. 266) of their research participants.

Online Data Is Human Subjects Research, Not Textual Research

Although online research data sets are more and more often being treated as "big data," defined in innumerable ways, feminist Internet researchers demand that online information be treated as human subjects research rather than textual research. Textual research—whether it's one piece of writing or thousands of discrete data points—is still data composed by or about humans. Research must be built from a feminist practice of situated knowledge (franzke et al. 67) and cannot be excised from its context. Morrow, Hawkins, and Kern write that official guidelines to

Internet research often treat “online users and researchers as disembodied and disconnected from places and relationships” as if “researchers can somehow ethically categorize the subjectivity and vulnerability of online users” (536). Understanding online research as human subjects research maintains that material connection to both participants and researchers.

Furthermore, feminist Internet research ethics maintains that online users should maintain rights over their information and online productions, including having a say in how it might appear in a research context. Rosemary Clark-Parsons often studies marginalized populations and aims to give her research participants agency and ownership over their personal information (Buchanan et al. 267). Stephanie Vie agrees and advocates for asking research participants about their level of comfort with identification and other options in a research project (Buchanan et. al 275). When it is not possible to obtain consent and consult with research participants, however, these conversations turn toward minimizing harm.

Feminist Internet Research Contests Traditional Notions of Public and Private Spaces

Although feminist Internet research ethics contest the notion that online public posting equals consent to research, Internet research complicates the very definition of “public.” Here are a few ways that thinking about “public” Internet research has evolved.

- Researchers have long since studied online communities where the researchers themselves were active participants. This is mostly based on (historically face-to-face) ethnographic principles that researchers get to know the communities they are studying. But when extended to online spaces, this practice can be a privacy violation because they are studying spaces where they have unique access due to their own interests, histories, or identities. In these instances, transparency and consent become concerns because the data is not, in fact, public. Similarly, researchers should not assume that they have the right to research in spaces where they have gained access to an online space that was not otherwise open-access (i.e. requires logins, paywalls, group membership, etc.; see, for example, Haywood’s decision to not study a Facebook group after contacted (32)). It still may be prudent to conduct such research, but with more forethought and justification to address such privacy measures (see, for example, Dadas’s approach to studying Facebook groups).

- Researchers study ephemeral data and it is not always clear what rights they have after an initial collection period. For example, researchers may not be aware that some social media sites require researchers to delete posts if they are deleted by the users. Ultimately, a feminist approach to Internet research ethics that prioritizes research participant agency undoubtedly creates more labor in refreshing data sets.

- Defining research participants can be challenging. For example, in Lauren E. Cagle's work on strangershots, she defines the research participant as the person who appears in the image, not the person who took the photograph or video. It may be difficult to identify that person, let alone contact them, and a similar situation may arise in a quoted tweet or other type of social media. Yet other types of data may have no identifiable author at all, such as memes. Given the wide range of privacy issues here, a situated approach is even more important to these authorship challenges.

- Accuracy is difficult to verify in public spaces. William L. Wolff interrogates the viability of conducting online research when so many spaces are overwrought with bots, fake user accounts, and misinformation. He asks, "what expectations of privacy do bots, trolls, and racists have?" (Buchanan et al. 264). Although Internet research ethics has traditionally encouraged caution, Wolff explains that in the current AI landscape, researchers may need to be more concerned with whether their data was even written by real humans (Buchanan et al. 265). Internet researchers will thus need to balance accuracy in their data sets with participant privacy.

Feminist Internet Researchers Should Protect Participant Identities

When it is not possible to obtain informed consent and ask for participant preferences, researchers should protect participant identities to the furthest extent, and especially through publishing practices. This guideline is a part of a feminist research ethic of care (franzke et al. 66; Dieterle), which outlines that an ethic of care toward participants, researchers, and affected communities should guide feminist research practices. An ethic of care in research means going beyond minimizing harm to actually taking responsibility for how our research might affect our participants (Dieterle 8), and seeing the research process as a reciprocal relationship.

Although informed consent is preferable, there are situations where it is not plausible or practical (for example, hundreds of users who contributed to a widespread Instagram campaign would be unlikely to respond to requests through Instagram about a research study). In these cases when there is still justification for doing the research, scholars have outlined a number of strategies for protecting participants, such as using pseudonyms, blurring out identifying features in images, altering quotes to reduce reverse searchability, and even only representing data in aggregate (Bruckman; Buchanan et al. 274-274, 280; Dieterle 6). Researchers can balance these options with the situated context of their studies and an ethic of care. For example, in our edited collection on hashtag activism (Ames and McDuffie), a number of contributors chose to include the identities of popular, verified Twitter users because they were already public figures. Researchers also agree that protecting participants' identities is even more vital when the subject or the participants themselves are more at-risk.

It is possible that hiding participants' identities can reduce their agency. For example, Bassett and O'Rierdan worried that anonymizing LGBTQ participants was an act of further marginalization and silencing (244), and we similarly worry that hiding the activists we study dishonors their intentions. Nonetheless, the current consensus in feminist Internet research studies is to conceal participants' identities without explicit consent to disclose identities in research publications, especially in an online culture rife with abuse.

Feminist Internet Research Ethics Call for an Interrogation of Researcher Positionality

It is now a common, and even vital, practice for researchers to consider their own relationship to the data that they collect and analyze (from anywhere, and especially online) (Morrow, Hawkins, and Kern 533). Throughout past studies, a scholar may or may not have discussed how they relate to their research depending on the context of the study. Perhaps a researcher explained how they came to be a part of a particular online community, or disclosed what inspired their commitment to a cause. Now, however, this kind of interrogation is expected in order to understand how our own positionalities–and the positionalities of our research participants–frame our studies and impact the outcomes. Interrogation is particularly important when a researcher seems distant from the study or when a research population is vulnerable.

Engaging in relevant theories can help with examining positionalities and power dynamics. For instance, Constance Haywood theorizes how Black feminist values can be applied to research methods to create a Black feminist ethic of care to enact community values, recognize participants' activism, and minimize harm when studying Black online communities (41). Another example is Caroline Dadas, who enacted transparency about her own identity in a queer methodological framework for studying the discursive construction of marriage equality on Facebook.

Interrogating researcher and participant positionality helps us be reflective researchers, which is an important feminist value (Morrow, Hawkins, and Kerns 533), and this reflexivity extends to reciprocity. Rosemary Clark-Parsons advocates for feminist practices of reciprocity toward research participants, such as making research results publicly accessible to participants so that the research benefits participants and related communities, in addition to researchers and academic institutions (Buchanan et al. 267). Stephanie Vie extends reciprocity to the co-creation of research projects when possible, including co-authorship of research publications (Buchanan et al. 275). Interpreting and innovating reflexivity and reciprocity are likely areas of growth for feminist Internet research ethics.

Feminist Internet Research Ethics Protects Researchers

An ethic of care in feminist research includes protecting scholars who are at a risk of harm by conducting their research. Brought to the forefront by happenings such as GamerGate, digital aggression research (research that examines problematic happenings, such as homophobic or racist discourse online) opens up researchers to being targeted, such as through flaming or doxxing. These researchers might already be at risk, as they are more likely to be female-identifying and experiencing emotional duress from the content of their studies. In response to this risk, Derek M. Sparby argues that "it is an ethical obligation for us to protect ourselves as researchers and humans" (45), and that this feminist ethic of care toward researchers should be considered early in the research process (51).

In our edited collection (Ames and McDuffie), we saw an ethic of care realized when an author chose to be published as Anonymous so as not to risk the unwanted attention of a known Twitter bully. Sparby makes suggestions for enacting self-care as an act of self-preservation, such as using a flexible research timeline (54), as well as enacting self-protection, such as making intentional decisions about publication venues, citation practices, and online identities (56). In this cluster conversation, Cam Cavaliere and Leigh Gruwell build on this framework and their own experiences conducting digital aggression research to describe mentoring practices that can help protect researchers who do this work.

Supporting Each Other

While it will always be difficult to derive precise rules for any particular Internet research project, especially when a feminist approach prioritizes the context of the research and being responsive to participant and researcher needs, the best practices outlined here present shared norms as identified by feminist Internet researchers in recent literature and our own experiences. Furthermore, heuristics outlined by other scholars provide a variety of questions that researchers can use to guide their decision-making processes as they go (see franzke et al., Buck and Ralston; and Taylor, Woods and Ralston, and Augustine in this cluster conversation).

In addition to providing more transparent conversations on feminist Internet research ethics within writing studies, rhetorical theory, and feminist media studies, we also argue for more mentoring and training of such ethics, particularly within editorial practices. For example, we endeavored to provide developmental and supportive feedback to contributors without assuming prior knowledge about these best practices. In our edited collection on hashtag activism (Ames and McDuffie), we developed and shared our intended standards for ethical research methods and related publication practices, and we provided editorial feedback intended to guide and protect scholars and their participants. We also listened to our authors about their choices and supported them, such as advocating to the press to include certain images. In turn, we learned from our contributors and enacted their findings and recommendations in our own work. Some scholars will think our protections unnecessary, while others will think that we did not go far enough.

Nonetheless, we aimed to balance participant confidentiality with our social justice research goals to amplify online activism. And we did our best to protect our authors from criticism, although that will surely come. Most importantly, we tried to treat our fellow scholars with the kindness and respect at the heart of a feminist ethic of care that should be extended to each other as scholars, as well as research participants and relevant communities. While standards for a feminist approach to Internet research ethics will continue to evolve, a feminist ethic of care to training and mentoring for Internet research ethics should be at the forefront of these discussions.

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