PANEL: Towards Ethical Guidelines for Social Media Analytics (SMA)

Deborah Bunker (Panel Chair)
The University of Sydney
Email: Deborah.bunker@sydney.edu.au

Caroline Chan
RMIT
Email: caroline.chan@rmit.edu.au

Dirk S. Hovorka
University of Sydney
Email: dirk.hovorka@sydney.edu.au

Sojen Prahdan
University of Technology Sydney
Email: Sojen.Pradhan@uts.edu.au

Mr Nicolas Frick
Professional Communication in Electronic Media/Social Media
University of Duisburg-Essen
Duisburg, Germany
Email: nicholas.frick@uni-due.de

Abstract

Objective: The panel will look at: the current status of ethics in social media analysis (SMA); the conflict between protecting the individual and research for a greater good; and the measures IS researchers should take to establish ethical guidelines for SMA.

Keywords: social media analytics, SMA, IT ethics, guidelines.

1 INTRODUCTION

The panel will look at:

a) the current status of ethics in social media analysis (SMA);

b) the conflict between protecting the individual and research for a greater good; and

c) the measures IS researchers should take to establish ethical guidelines for SMA.

This panel will actively and openly discuss the topic of ethics and SMA, as well point to the pitfalls and challenges of strict ethical regulations, by reflecting their effects on the daily life of researchers. It seeks to explore: what are the problems that researchers are confronted with concerning the implementation of ethical research approaches to SMA; and at which point do we need more financial, personal and technological resources to conduct ethical SMA?

2 BACKGROUND

The enormous growth of social media usage has led to an increasing accumulation of data, which has been termed Social Media Big Data. Social media platforms offer many possibilities of data formats, including textual data, pictures, videos, sounds, and geolocations (Stieglitz et al., 2018). This diverse social media data has spawned numerous attractive opportunities for researchers and practitioners to analyse social media users and their behaviour.

In general, social media data can be used for the benefit of individuals and society. For example, by analysing social media data one might get a better understanding about thoughts and preferences of people on political topics. During crisis situations, social media analysis might help to identify useful information in real-time. For companies, social media data could be investigated to identify new trends or ways to improve their products. Therefore, social media data can be analysed by journalists, political parties and companies to sell their products and ideas to social media users, who are most open to their messages. This form of microtargeting raises a scientific and societal discussion about the ethical implications of profiling social media users. While some users might enjoy being confronted with news, politics and advertisements which match their mindset, the profiling of social media users can be a double-edged sword. The often highly personal data i.e. extracted social media data, can range from sexual orientation and religious beliefs to ethnic background, and might be misused. For instance, undemocratic societies could be interested in identifying potential regime opponents, and also the leaders of democratic societies can misuse social media data to spread fake news and influence opinion formation processes, as was highlighted by the Cambridge Analytica Scandal.

Furthermore, social media analytics, as an analysis of big data with help of machine learning algorithms, is confronting IS researchers with typical epistemic concerns. The way that conclusions are drawn from the data that is tracked by researchers can lead to inconclusive, inscrutable and misguided evidence (Mittelstadt et al., 2016). So there is a huge ethical concern for academics and industry alike, as wrong conclusions about individuals might be drawn, bearing in mind that social networks do not always reflect the society as a whole e.g. the widely researched platform Twitter attracts a special user group (Boyd and Crawford, 2012). Researchers sometimes lose track of what are simple correlations of data and what can be interpreted as a causal connection (Illari and Russo, 2014). In reaction to numerous data scandals, many official and legislative bodies have developed stricter data protection regulations. For instance, the General Data Protection Regulation of the European Union came into force in 2018 and it confronts social media researchers with new standards on how to track, store and analyse data (EU, 2018).

Researchers now find themselves in a conflict with individual data protection laws and regulations and research objectives including the analysis of personal data that may contribute to the greater good of society (Bunker et al., 2019). If this conflict limits the possibilities of researchers to investigate and understand social media platforms, it will increase the knowledge divide between platform providers, that own and use all the data, and researchers who are limited by restricted access, terms of trade and ethical concerns. The analysis of social media data in crisis situations to support emergency service agencies, is one example where such research has a morally good aim. Researchers, but also journalists, politicians and managers need to ask what constitutes ethical rules and approaches of responsible social media analysis (Zook et al., 2017)?

3 PANEL FORMAT

Welcome (10 minutes)

- Welcoming of audience and Panellists; and

- Short introduction of all Panellists.

Assessing the Current Situation (20 minutes)

- What is current practice regarding ethics in SMA research?
- What are the greatest ethical challenges (as identified) and how do they impact your work?
- How do existing user and data protection regulations impact your work?

A Philosophical Discussion (20 minutes).

- What are the tensions between research for greater good and the protection of the individual social media platform users/user groups?
- What is more important: the individual right for protection; or research for a greater good?
- Who decides what is good for society as a whole?

What Should We Do? (20 minutes)

- What approach to SMA should IS researchers take in order to not violate human rights and ethical guidelines of research?

Summation (20 minutes)

- We will then close the panel asking each Panellist to suggest one contribution to possible ethical guidelines for researchers/practitioners, who work with SMA.

4 REFERENCES

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PRESENTERS

Professor Deborah Bunker (University of Sydney) is a leading international scholar in organizational collaboration and change management in complex organizational and environmental settings. She is a Chief Investigator on an EU Horizon 2020 project RISE_SMA Social Media Analytics for Society and Crisis Communication and a Norwegian Research Council SAMRISK Work Program project INSITU Sharing Incident and Threat Information During Crises.

Professor Caroline Chan (RMIT) is the Head of School of Business IT and Logistics and is a full professor of Information Systems. She undertakes research in eBusiness and Supply Chain Management. Caroline is currently the president of Australian Council Australian Council of Professors and Heads of Information Systems (ACPHIS), the peak body established to represent Australian Information Systems academics in matters of national and international importance.

Associate Professor Dirk Hovorka

Dirk S. Hovorka is an Associate Professor in the Business Information Systems discipline. He holds as MS in Geology and an MS in Interdisciplinary Telecommunications and received his PhD in Information Systems from the University of Colorado. His research is centered on: the philosophical foundations of IS research with a focus on theory and theory development; design practices, ecosystems, configurations and theory: and on the co-constitutive role of information systems in scientific research.

Dr Sojen Pradhan is a lecturer at School of Information, Systems and Modelling with an extensive experience of over 25 years in teaching. He holds PhD in Computer Science and MBA from UTS. Previously he has completed MSc from Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal.

Mr Nicolas Frick