

Research Ethics for Students & Teachers: Social Media in the Classroom

Faculty are using social media in the classroom more and more. It's exciting to have students engage real world discussions with thought leaders in real time. But these practices raise some important questions. What is the cost to the social media user that you expect your students to engage, for free? Should students contact social media users? If so how? We hope to answer these questions and more in the following guidelines for syllabi.

When designing a social media project you need to think about potential risks and benefits to the social media users you'd like your students to engage, study, read, follow, etc. In general, we do not recommend having your students interact with users without their consent. This means approaching users before your class starts and finding out if they'd be open to you and your students engaging their feed. Many users may be opposed to such an inquiry. There are many cases of academics, scholars, and journalists engaging people's social media content in ways that cause harm to the users due to unwanted and out-of-context exposure among other things. If users say no, or don't respond, respect these actions as a boundary.

What is social media?

Social media refers to online platforms, websites and games where the content is produced by the users for free. Social media is generally defined by the way it is designed to be used: social media is designed for users to connect with a small or large population through these sites, and often post material that is intended for a specific audience, even if it can be accessed by a larger, unintended audience. Social media platforms include:

Facebook	Twitter
Tumblr	Pinterest
Instagram	Snapchat
YouTube	Periscope
Online games	Personal Blogs (blogs published by the person writing majority of content)

Who are social media users?

Anyone with an account on the platforms named is a social media user. People who read material without accounts on these platforms are also social media users. Some folks post or use these platforms so much that they have gained the attention of traditional media outlets. These users experience a disproportionate amount of interest from journalists, researchers, and other social media users. Not all attention is good attention. Frequently, heightened attention by journalists, researchers, and others opens up a social media user to harassment, threats of violence, and violence,. For this reason, the ethical approach to conducting social media research *even as a student* is to ask for consent before using someone else's social media content in your research project. *Just because someone has posted on a social media site, does not mean that they have consented to become targets, and exposing social media users including your students--especially those targeted for race- and gender-based attacks--is one possible harmful outcome of a class assignment.*

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Aren't tweets/posts public?

Material posted on social media is not the same as a 'text' — like a book, article in a newspaper, etc. Because many social media users tweet for themselves, not for work and not for profit, their tweets should not be read in the same way one reads other types of professionally produced media. While users may be willing to talk to people they know, and other users they choose, this does not mean they want to be analysed or in conversation with you or your students. While these tweets might be publicly accessible, that does not mean that they should automatically be fodder for a class project or an article. We need to shift our thinking about social media posts as traditional 'texts,' towards thinking of these posts as private conversations that happen in public, like in a public square or a coffee shop.

Moving toward an accountability model

Ethically using the work of social media users in our classrooms and research requires shifting from textual analysis to community-engaged research methodologies. This means that, rather than approaching social media content as 'texts,' you think of social media users as research 'subjects,' and attend to these subjects and their work with the rigor, care, respect you would a research subject who you were meeting face-to-face. Instead of thinking about how much material you can grab from social media users, try thinking about your own accountability to the communities and subjects you are studying. Accountability is a process that take time, so plan ahead. You may want to use our Power and Control and Respect Wheels to help understand the complexities of accountable engagement.

How do we think about labor and compensation?

When you use social media users' timelines in class discussions and projects, you might be tempted to treat them like a traditional texts (books, articles, etc.) that just happen to be freely available online. The user, however, was not compensated for what they wrote. This is a common misconception! Social media users may gain celebrity, but this doesn't come with the economic stability provided by other kinds of work and doesn't necessarily translate into future economic prospects like other kinds of prestige. Social media users also don't usually receive professional credit the way academics do for publications. Social media authors' intellectual contributions to your classroom are the result of free labor and should not be treated the same as a book or article that has passed through the editorial processes, contracts, and fee payments associated with "publishing." How can you make a social media user's interactions with your class worth their time? Can you pay them? Are there other forms of non-monetary compensation you could provide (i.e. co-authorship, community support, etc.)?

Research ethics do not end with citation

By now the major citation formats (MLA, Chicago, APA) have published guidelines for how to properly cite social media posts, but attention to research ethics and academic integrity does not end with citation (i.e. name, date, etc.) Citation also requires that you document the context of the social media materials that you are using, and that you account for the trajectory of the material, ie., seeking out the Original Poster (OP) for a hashtag, or viral post and considering the conversation context. Social media posts are usually part of a longer conversation. Students needs to be aware of the conversation context and need to learn how to account for it.

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Questions to Answer as You Prepare for Social Media Research

In her article **#transform(ing)DH Writing and Research: An Autoethnography of Digital Humanities and Feminist Ethics** (<http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/9/2/000209/000209.html>) Moya Bailey offers a set of questions for researchers. How might these questions be adapted for your classroom assignment?

CONNECT

Who are your collaborators?

What community is your research accountable to beyond your academic community?

How will you demonstrate your desire to be accountable to them?

Are there people you can talk to about the impact of your research beyond the IRB/REB?

How does everyone benefit from the research?

What questions does the community want answered?

Can people be compensated in ways that honor their time and skills?

CREATE

What tools and or methods encourage multidirectional collaboration?

What mechanism of accountability can you create?

Are there ways that collaborators can use the research process to their own ends?

What kind of process can you create for your research?

Is there room for collaborators to give and rescind consent at different times during the research process?

Does the pace of the project meet your needs and your collaborators needs?

TRANSFORM

How will you take care of yourself in the research process?

What do you and your collaborators need to stay sustained while conducting the research?

What happens after the research product is complete?

How will you be transformed?

Will the research strengthen your connection to your collaborators?

Did you and your collaborators come to new understandings?

Social media is not a quick fix

Many educational institutions are now requiring faculty (especially in the Arts and Humanities) to demonstrate the relevance of our curriculum, and it can seem that using social media-based assignments is the best, easiest or fastest way to do this.

We encourage you to resist the impulse to quickly throw together a social media assignment without first considering the ways that social media materials are highly contextual, and platform-specific. With your students, learn about these contexts and platforms and the people who use them, rather than simply extracting content or initiating contact without adequate preparation.

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In the **Twitter Manifesto** (<https://modelviewculture.com/pieces/the-twitterethics-manifesto>) by Dorothy Kim & Eunsong Kim, they argue that there are specific ways that faculty and journalists should respect twitter users. These include:

1. Reject the object-oriented approach.
2. Recognize that journalists, reporters, media companies, professors are not leaders of the analysis — there is no bird's eye view.
3. Move away from the pyramid to a circular system that values process over product.
4. Allow for a multiplicity of views.
5. Academics should move towards radical research systems that circulate and open dialogue up to participatory modes.

Some final notes

Before jumping into a social media platform with your students, pull back the curtain and study the way the platform works. Ask students to develop complex understandings of the sites they are using:

- what are the terms of use? privacy settings?
- what kinds of users does the platform attract?
- what are the ways different ways that people use the platform?
- what are the conversations? and how do they take place?
- what are the risks and benefits associated with the platform?
- how would the students want their social media material to be used?
- how would they want to be treated as research subjects?

Additional resources

We've compiled a brief list of **published** resources that we think are related to the questions of ethics and teaching with social media. *Please keep in mind that these folks don't necessarily want to engage with you or your class, but their work helps to contextualize the current discussion.*

- Did your university archive ethically, responsibly, and critically document #StudentBlackOut protests occurring in the academic year 2016?
 - <https://twitter.com/search?q=%23StudentBlackOut>
- Carolyn Sinders: Designing Consent into Social Networks
 - <http://www.datasociety.net/events/databite-no-60-caroline-sinders/>
- Eira Tansey: Large-Scale Archiving And The Right To Be Forgotten
 - <http://eiratansey.com/2015/08/16/my-talk-at-personal-digital-archiving-2015>
- Jamie Nesbitt Golden: What Happens When a Journalist Uses Your Tweets In a Story?
 - <https://medium.com/thoughts-on-media/what-happens-when-a-journalist-uses-your-tweets-for-a-story-part-one-a8f3db9340ad#.rbvzqo-hqd>
- Brian X. Chen & Natasha Singer: What else are you sharing? Here, have a cookie.
 - http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/18/technology/personaltech/free-tools-to-keep-those-creepy-online-ads-from-watching-you.html?_r=0https://donottrack-doc.com/en/intro/
- This Tweet Called My Back by @tgirlinterruptd, @chiefelk, @bad_dominicana, @aurabogado, @so_treu, @blackamazon and @thetrudz. Originally posted to thistweetcalledmyback.tumblr.com.
 - <https://modelviewculture.com/pieces/thistweetcalledmyback>

Contract for Students

I, _____ will conduct my research for this class _____, in such a way that I try to minimize harm to people I engage for my project. Harm could be _____

I will discuss with my professor and classmates any potential problems that may arise and will do my best to account for the power discrepancies that result from my role as a research in relation to my collaborators.

I will not take other people's words out of context, and I will do my best to provide the the original context of social media materials that I quote or paraphrase.

I will do my best to identify and attribute the Original Poster (OP) for a thread, hashtag or other posted materials.