

Social media research ethical and privacy guidelines

George Washington University Libraries

Last updated February 15, 2018

Ethical social media research requires balancing the public good of the research with the impact on the creators of social media content. To help you consider how to conduct ethical social media research, we share these guidelines. These are general guidelines; there will be exceptions or cases that are not covered. The guidelines focus on the collecting, sharing, and publishing of social media data. Ethical considerations in research design and analysis should also be considered but are not covered here.

Since most social media research at GW involves Twitter, these guidelines highlight considerations for Twitter. However, some of the Twitter-specific guidance can be applied to other social media platforms or more broadly, to any data sources that involve “public” data.

These guidelines are intended for GW researchers (faculty, students, staff, librarians, other researchers) using social media data collected by GW Libraries or using social media tools provided by GW Libraries (viz., Social Feed Manager or TweetSets), though most of the guidance applies to social media research in general, regardless of the source of the data. We ask that you familiarize yourself with and abide by these guidelines; we also ask that you share them with all members of your research team and/or collaborators. They are not official policy, but are provided for your consideration. These guidelines also govern the work with social media data by GW Libraries staff.

General

- In addition to reading these guidelines, you should also familiarize yourself with the policies of the social media platform. (Here’s Twitter’s Developer Policy: <https://developer.twitter.com/en/developer-terms/agreement-and-policy.html>.) These policies can be intimidating / confusing and may be subject to change. If you have questions, let us know.
- Consider any ethical guidelines that govern your discipline or profession.

Data collecting

- Be especially thoughtful about collecting the social media of vulnerable individuals, such as minors or social activists.
- Be especially thoughtful about collecting social media that could be sensitive or harmful, e.g. posts about morally questionable behavior, financial problems, mental health issues and feelings of suicide, controversial political opinions and activism.
- Geography-based collecting may pose issues to users’ privacy.

Data sharing

- As required by Twitter policies, Twitter datasets containing the text of tweets may be shared with other GW researchers or non-GW collaborators for academic purposes. A collaborator is anyone who is highly involved with the research; you would typically expect that person to be a co-author on a paper produced from the research.
- As required by Twitter policies, when sharing Twitter data with others or posting publicly, only post tweet ids of the tweets. *To be clear: Do not publicly post or share datasets which contain the text of tweets.*
- Sharing derivatives from datasets (e.g., summary statistics) is generally acceptable.
- For data that you collect, GW Libraries will not share them with other GW researchers without your permission. If using Social Feed Manager (SFM), you can enable the sharing of a collection with other GW SFM users.

Publishing

- For some types of social media posts, authors retain copyright. However, fair use generally allows for use of the posts in academic research.
- For privacy considerations, when quoting a post it is recommended to get permission from the author. For cases when this isn't possible, see Williams, Burnap, and Sloan (2017) referenced below for a discussion.
- Do not rely on anonymizing posts; the author of the post can often still be identified by searching.

Additional

- While social media users' posts are public, remember that social media users have not given permission for the posts to be used in research or are even aware that they may be used in research.
- Be especially sensitive to the accounts of private citizens / personal accounts. Less sensitivity is required for accounts associated with public figures, politicians, corporations, government, news organization, bots, or the like. Respect the privacy of users and the right to be forgotten.
- If you are merely collecting and analyzing social media data, IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval is generally not required; interacting with users requires consideration of IRB rules. At GW, the IRB is supported by the Office of Human Research, referenced below.

Additional resources

- GW's Office of Human Research: <https://humanresearch.gwu.edu/> and ohrirb@gwu.edu
- Association of Internet Researchers: <https://aoir.org/ethics/>
- The University of Aberdeen, Social Media Research: A Guide to Ethics: <http://www.dotrural.ac.uk/socialmediaresearchethics.pdf>
- Matthew L Williams, Pete Burnap, Luke Sloan (2017). "Towards an Ethical Framework for Publishing Twitter Data in Social Research: Taking into Account Users' Views, Online Context and Algorithmic Estimation"
<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0038038517708140>

- “Manifesto for Data Practices” <https://datapactices.org/manifesto/>

If you have questions or would like to suggest improvements, come talk to us (sfm@gwu.edu).