

Using Social Media Data in Research at ECU

ECU Research Governance have developed a range of guidelines which describe the institutions position on key ethical matters. These guidelines should be used by ECU researchers and reviewers alike to ensure the ethical conduct of research at ECU is consistent with the University's position as well as other external guidelines, policies and legislation.

Guideline

All data which are generated by humans in any way, including digital information generated by the public through their use of mobile devices and the internet, are subject to the basic principles of the [National Statement on Ethics Conduct of Research 2007 \(Update 2018\)](#) (National Statement) which require a person's consent to use that information. This means each person must have the opportunity to read an information letter and provide consent for the use of their information. Where consent cannot be obtained by individuals, a researcher must seek a waiver of consent when applying for ethics approval.

Research that involves only the use of existing collections of data or records that contain non-identifiable data about human beings may not require consent. Social media data obtained from organisations, groups or individuals requires the consent of the platform provider, group administrator or page owner, unless impractical to do so.

Background

There are some important ethical considerations to be aware of and address when using social media data. This guideline provides advice to ECU staff and students when seeking to determine the level of ethical review required for research involving data derived from social media posts which are available on publicly accessible platforms. Researchers need to consider:

How public are the data?

Data is not 'publicly available' if it requires a login or other access method.

Are there terms and conditions in accessing the social media site?

Are permissions required from data custodians or the platform holding the data?

Were data originally posted/written/collected for research purposes?

If not, it should NOT be assumed that the author has given consent.

What are the risks involved?

Will it cause embarrassment, shame or defamation? Are there legal implications (ie: confidentiality, copyright laws and intellectual property ownership)?

Consent

How feasible is it to gain consent? A waiver of consent may be required.

Identifiability

Is it possible to identify who provided the data or who it is about?

If verbatim quotes are used, could a search uncover the identity of the person?

For researchers seeking clarification about the use of social media data in research, the following sections of the National Statement (NS) are most relevant:

Chapter 3.1 Elements of research

Element 4: Collection, Use and Management of Data and Information

“This section addresses ethical issues related to generation, collection, access, use, analysis, disclosure, storage, retention, disposal, sharing and re-use of data or information....

The increased ability to link data in ways that preserve privacy has greatly enhanced the contribution that collections of data can make to generating knowledge, as it enables researchers to match individuals in different data sets without explicitly identifying them... “

National Statement Page 32

The question then arises as to what constitutes data and information that could be used for research purposes? The NS indicates:

“Data and information may include, but not be limited to:

- *what people say in interviews, focus groups, questionnaires/surveys, personal histories and biographies;*
- *images, audio recordings and other audio-visual materials;*
- *records generated for administrative purposes (e.g. billing, service provision) or as required by legislation (e.g. disease notification);*
- ***digital information generated directly by the population through their use of mobile devices and the internet;***
- *physical specimens or artefacts;*
- *information generated by analysis of existing personal information (from clinical, organizational, social, observational or other sources);*
- *observations;*
- *results from experimental testing and investigations; and*
information derived from human biospecimens such as blood, bone, muscle and urine.”

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Therefore, the NS recognises that digital information generated directly by the population through their use of mobile devices and the internet constitutes data/information. Guidance is then provided in terms of the ethical issues that should be considered by researchers when designing research that uses online data. Those issues are:

Identifiability of information

“Researchers and reviewers must consider the identifiability of data and information in order to assess the risk of harm or discomfort to research participants or others who may be at risk. “

National Statement Page 33

Secondary use of data or information

“Research may involve access to and use of data or information that was originally generated or collected for previous research or for non-research purposes, including routinely collected data or information. This is commonly called ‘secondary use of data or information’. The main ethical issue arising from this use is the scope of consent provided or, alternatively, the impracticability of obtaining consent.”

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“Privacy concerns arise when the proposed access to or use of the data or information does not match the expectations of the individuals from whom this data or information was obtained or to whom it relates. These issues are especially complex in the context of the access to or use of information relating to individuals that is available on the internet, including social media posts, tweets, self-generated ‘lifelogging’ data emitted from mobile phones and other ‘smart’ appliances and data or information generated through applications and devices related to personal pursuits, such as fitness activity, gambling, dating and web-based gaming.”

National Statement Page 36

“Data or information available on the internet can range from information that is fully in the public domain (such as books, newspapers and journal articles), to information that is public, but where individuals who have made it public may consider it to be private, to information that is fully private in character. **The guiding principle for researchers is that, although data or information may be publicly available, this does not automatically mean that the individuals with whom this data or information is associated have necessarily granted permission for its use in research. Therefore, use of such information will need to be considered in the context of the need for consent or the waiver of the requirement for consent by a reviewing body and the risks associated with the use of this information.**”

National Statement Page 36

“Researchers should understand the context in which data or information was collected or disclosed, including the existence of any relationship of confidence or, if available on the internet, the privacy settings that apply. This includes avoiding the use or disclosure of information that was obtained unethically or illegally.”

National Statement Page 37

Further Information

1. [National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research](#)

Contact information

For queries relating to this document please contact research.ethics@ecu.edu.au

Version History

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