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Guest Editorial: Introduction to AoIR 2021 Papers on Emerging ethical Practices and Platform Challenges

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Background

Welcome to this special issue of the *Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society (JICES)* highlighting notable contributions in the domain of internet research ethics from the 2021 Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) annual conference. This is AoIR's second collaboration with *JICES*, a partnership initiated in 2019 by Charles Ess, then-Chair of the AoIR Ethics Working Group and Simon Rogerson, then-Chief Editor of *JICES*. As Ess noted in the inaugural special issue, "the AoIR community has fostered critical reflection on the ethical and social dimensions of the internet and Internet-facilitated communication [...] since its inception in 2000" and this "clearly dovetail[s] with *JICES*' interests" (Ess, 2021, p. 313). The papers presented in this *JICES* special issue reflect some of the latest research engaging with the complexities of addressing ethics in internet research from various disciplinary perspectives, methods and platforms.

The AoIR Ethics Working Committee first introduced its ethics guidelines in 2002 which took a largely pragmatic approach to its ethical recommendations for engaging in internet-based research (Ess and Jones, 2002). Version 2.0 was released a decade later, with a more nuanced and contextual set of guidelines and ethically reflexive questions all internet researchers should engage with when designing their methodology (Markham and Buchanan, 2012). In 2019, AoIR released Version 3.0 which reveals the association's continued evolution by including ethical reflections on the broader research lifecycle as well as the ethical protection of researchers themselves (Franzke *et al.*, 2020). Over the course of these two decades, the AoIR ethics guidelines have been proven helpful and relevant to researchers and ethical review committees alike, and the annual conferences have included high-quality research highlighting both the usefulness of the guidelines as well as cases where challenges remain in how to engage in ethically-informed internet research practices.

We are excited to present four exceptional contributions from the AoIR 2022 conference that stand as exemplars of the AoIR's continued critical and pragmatic engagement with the ethical dimensions of internet research, and are thankful to *JICES* for their continued support in facilitating the dissemination of this important work to broader audiences.

Conference panels

The AoIR Ethics Working Group organized two panels consisting of eight papers that engaged with research ethics during the AoIR annual conference held virtually in October 2021. The first panel, titled "Practices and Roadmaps" (Zimmer and Hård af Segerstad, 2021a) consisted of four papers exploring a broad (but shared) range of practices that present ethical challenges in internet research, while also providing possible roadmaps toward addressing these concerns. These papers included: "Problematising Ethics and Individual Responsibility for Researchers Studying the Far Right" by Antonia Vaughan (University of Bath, UK), which highlighted the risks and challenges researchers face when researching far-right communities online; "Ethical dilemmas in researching sexual crimes of children in the digital society" by Marie Eneman (University of Gothenburg, Sweden), which explored the ethical dilemmas faced when researching online sexual crimes involving children; "Navigating the Ethical Grey Zone - Improvising Best Practice When Routines and Protocols for Management of Research Data are Missing" by Ylva Hård af Segerstad, Stefan Nilsson and Maria Olsson (all of University of Gothenburg, Sweden) that explored practical challenges to conducting ethically responsible research; and "Mapping the Field of Data Ethics: A Roadmap for Educators" by Tian Zheng, Isabelle Zaugg and Jonathan Reeve (all of Columbia University, USA) which introduced a useful analysis of data ethics syllabi to provide a framework to guide how we teach data and internet ethics.

A second panel was also convened, titled "Platform Challenges" (Zimmer and Hård af Segerstad, 2021b) consisting of five papers exploring a broad (but in many ways, common) set of ethical dilemmas faced by researchers engaged with specific platforms such as Reddit, Amazon's Mechanical Turk and private messaging platforms. These include: "Reddit Research And Reflexivity: A Situated Ethics Framework for Publicly Available User-Generated Data" by Martyna Gliniecka (Western Sydney University, Australia) that studied people's online conversations about health matters on Reddit in support of a proposed situated ethics framework for researchers working with publicly available data; "Ethical research and the practice and efficacy of masking Reddit sources" by Joseph Reagle (Northeastern University, USA) that reported on the sourcing practices among Reddit researchers to

determine if their sources could be unmasked and located in Reddit archives; “Addressing Ethics in Reddit Research: A Systematic Review” by Casey Fiesler (University of Colorado Boulder, USA), Michael Zimmer (Marquette University, USA), Nicholas Proferes (Arizona State University, USA), Sarah Gilbert (University of Maryland, USA) and Naiyan Jones (UK Office for National Statistics, UK) provides a broad systematic review of over 700 research studies that used Reddit data to assess the kinds of analysis and methods researchers are engaging in as well as any ethical considerations that emerge when researching Reddit; “The “Original Sin” of Amazon Mechanical Turk for Academic Research” by Huichan Xia (Peking University, China) that engages in a critical examination of the use of Amazon’s Mechanical Turk for academic research; and “Ethical Approaches to Closed Messaging Research: Considerations for Democratic Contexts” by Connie Moon Sehat, Tarunima Prabhakar and Aleksei Kaminski, which investigates current practices and ethical dilemmas faced when researching closed messaging applications their users. Taken together, these papers illuminate emerging ethical dilemmas facing researchers when investigating novel platforms and user communities; challenges often not fully addressed – if even contemplated – in existing ethical guidelines.

Contributions for special issue

From these AoIR Ethics Working Group panels, along with invitations to selected other authors presenting at AoIR 2021 papers were further developed and submitted to *JICES* for peer review. After multiple rounds of revisions and review, these four papers were accepted for publication, and are presented here as important examples of the AoIR community’s continued engagement with the ethical dimensions of internet research from various disciplinary perspectives, methods and platforms.

The first paper is “Critical Care and the Early Web: Ethical Digital Methods for Archived Youth Data” by Katherine Mackinnon (University of Toronto, Canada), and it details the ethical challenges facing researchers engaging with web archival materials and introduces a novel framework for conducting research with historical web data created by young people. This so-called “archive promenade” method is used by Mackinnon to reveal how individual attachments to digital traces are varied and unpredictable, which creates unique obligations by researchers ensure that privacy and data sovereignty are respected when using youth-generated web material. With this paper, Mackinnon reveals how the “archive promenade” method can lead to better practices of care with sensitive web materials.

In “Ethical Dilemmas when Conducting Sensitive Research: Interviewing Offenders Convicted of Child Pornography,” Marie Eneman (University of Gothenburg, Sweden) uses an autoethnography to reflect on the ethical dilemmas that emerge when conducting qualitative research on a highly sensitive topics, in her case interviews with offenders convicted of child pornography. Her findings point to difficult ethical challenges not always contemplated in traditional research ethics guidelines, such how to provide confidentiality when interviewing offenders about their criminal activities, acknowledging the vulnerability and insecurity of the researcher when studying marginalized and stigmatized group, and the considerable emotional challenges for the researcher when documenting serious crimes against children.

Huichuan Xia (Peking University, China) provides an analysis of how scholars increasingly rely on crowd work platforms such as Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) for research implementation and data

collection. In his paper, “The Original Sin of Crowd Work for Academic Research,” Xia highlights two critical concerns with regard to crowd work-based research: first, the negligence of the teleological difference between crowd work and academic research, and second, the ontological schism between scholars and IRBs in their ethical concerns and practices.

And the fourth paper is “Mapping Data Ethics Curricula,” where Tian Zheng, Isabelle Zaugg and Jonathan Reeve (Columbia University, USA) share their work toward visualizing the field of data ethics curricula. Through a structured analysis of a large corpus of data ethics syllabi, they highlight relations between courses, instructors, texts and writers, and present an interactive tool for exploring the relations and interconnections within this multidisciplinary domain. Their semantically organized and linked open data graph provide a helpful framework for modeling this field of study, which will be useful for anyone needing to gain a better understanding of the textual and social map of the data ethics domain.

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