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An ethical perspective for researchers using travel blog analysis as a method of data collection

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Abstract

Social researchers have been required to consider the potential ethical implications of their research since research began. Recently however, the importance placed upon research ethics has undoubtedly increased, evident through the formation of additional ethic committees, the production of various ethical guidelines and the increased number of publications addressing the concept. However, with the emergence of new and diverse research approaches, it can be suggested that there should also be the development of new and diverse ethical approaches. In this article, we consider the ethical stance taken when undertaking travel blog analysis and argue that due to the diverse and continuously evolving nature of travel blogs, the blanket approach that is so frequently adopted by researchers is not sufficient. We reflect on the ethics of utilising travel blog content as a method of data collection by considering the importance of whether the blogger is viewed as a human subject, whether data collected from blogs are public or private, the need for informed consent and whether the blogger should be viewed as an author or a respondent. We then proceed to contribute to the body of existing ethical research by proposing a set of broad ethical principles that can be applied for those undertaking travel blog analysis.

Keywords

Travel, tourism, blog, netnography, ethics

Introduction

The past two decades have seen rise to momentous developments in Internet capabilities and complexities, and the surge of usage has changed the face of the world that we live in. In response to such expansive developments of the Internet, researchers are now beginning to make use of the valuable new data forms that to date have been under-exploited. Yet, it can be argued that the ethical approaches and guidelines have not been adequately discussed or updated in response to this (Stainton, 2016). Ethical challenges arise in all designs and approaches and at all stages of research projects and the expanding regulatory structure of ethics bureaucracy within academia has been described as ‘colonising new groups, practices, and institutions, while at the same time intensifying the regulation of practices deemed to fall within its official ambit’ (Haggerty, 2004: 394).

Despite many ethical issues being difficult to define (Seale, 2012), it is therefore imperative that researchers do their upmost to identify any potential ethical implications that could occur and to overcome these in order to meet the

regulatory demands of the institution with which they are working. Social researchers have discussed research ethics for specific methodologies for years, and there are clear guidelines to adopt for those undertaking traditional methods of data collection such as surveys and interviews. However, when undertaking data collection methods of a more innovative nature, such as travel blog analysis, researchers are given little direction.

This reflective article stems from ethical discussions and an arduous ethical approval process experienced while undertaking PhD research (Stainton, 2017). During this time, it was found to be the case that for research involving

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analysing blogs as a data source, there were no specific guidelines or suggested ethical approaches from which we could work from. Rather, we were required to succumb to generic ethical procedures. These generic approaches, however, failed to take into account the complexities of the human world combined with the Internet sphere, which is a relatively new realm within academia. Research addressing online research methodologies remains to be in its infancy and thus the ethical implications associated are substantially under-researched. There were certain characteristics of blog analysis, as we proceed to discuss throughout this article, that posed new dilemmas for our research. This article therefore is designed to bring awareness to social researchers working in the field of online methodologies while providing guidance to the future travel blog researcher.

Netnography in the 'blogosphere'

In recent years, the Internet and online social networking have become an integral part of society. As a result of the importance and reliance placed upon online presence, researchers have begun to turn to Internet sources, such as blogs, as a valuable means of data collection (e.g. Carson and Schmallegger, 2008; Hookway, 2008; Punch, 2014). Research such as this can be described as netnography – a form of ethnographic data collection undertaken via the Internet, unique in that it is neither observational of a life lived nor told in a research situation, but instead *posted by tourists* (Blicheldt and Marabese, 2014; Meged et al., 2014).

Netnography can be undertaken through analysis of a number of online means, including Facebook updates, tweets, recommendations on Trip Advisor, discussions on specialised online forums and blogs (Meged et al., 2014). These online means fall within the realms of what is collectively known as Web 2.0. This is seen as the second stage of Internet development, whereby generators have stepped away from traditional statically designed web pages, towards user-generated content (UGC) and peer-to-peer applications (Carson, 2008). Of these online means, blogs are considered to be 'the next evolution of the web-based experience' (Kahn and Kellner, 2004: 91) and have demonstrated rapid growth (Hookway, 2008; Mack et al., 2008; Pan et al., 2007).

The forms and appearances of blogs are manifold and cover a vast array of subject matter (Carson and Schmallegger, 2008; Gaille, 2013; Technorati, 2013), including travel and tourism. These sources can be data-rich, containing valuable information that may otherwise be unavailable to researchers (Banyai and Glover, 2012; Stainton, 2016). Travel blogs are frequently the equivalent of personal online diaries, made up from one or more individual entries strung together by a common theme. They are commonly written by tourists to report back to friends and families about their activities and experiences during trips (Puhlinger and Taylor, 2008: 179). Blogs are frequently updated and displayed in reverse chronological and they tend to be interactive in nature, allowing readers to post comments (Carson and Schmallegger, 2008).

In tourism studies, travel blogs have thus far been defined as online diaries containing individual entries related to the author's travel experience (Banyai and Glover, 2012; Puhlinger and Taylor, 2008). There is a growing body of research (e.g. Carson, 2008; Litvin, et al., 2008; Pan et al., 2007; Wenger, 2008) suggesting that such blogs contain rich data regarding travellers' behaviour, expectations and demands, and success or failure of destination marketing campaigns, the analysis of which could prove more beneficial than the use of traditional marketing tools (Akehurst, 2009). It can be argued, however, that the nature of travel blogs extends beyond the notion of simply documenting experiences, with many travel bloggers now running their websites as a career option, where the aim is to enhance readership and to facilitate opportunities to make money through aspects such as advertising, as opposed to simply documenting their personal experiences. This is an area not currently addressed within the existing body of literature that is worthy of consideration.

Travel bloggers are free to upload a range of content of their choice, making this data source unique in that it is not in any way influenced by the researcher. Furthermore, data from blogs derive from naturally occurring, communal, cross-consumer interaction that is not found in alternative research methods (Meged et al., 2014; Banyai and Glover, 2012). In 2013, there were over 152 million blogs accounted for on the Internet (Gaille, 2013). According to Technorati's (2013) Digital Influence Report, blogs rank among the top five 'most trustworthy' sources for information on the Internet with consumers and in 2009, 20% of all the blogs were tagged as travel blogs (Technorati, 2009). However, despite such popularity of blogs as a method of research outside of academia, this has not to date been echoed within scholarly practice (Snee, 2010) and research on travel blogs is still in its infancy (Banyai and Glover, 2012). Therefore, it can be noted that there is potentially valuable information in the form of travel blogs that is yet to be explored by academics.

Ethical dilemmas for travel blog researchers

Research has recently begun to emerge addressing the ethical considerations of online research (e.g. Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), 2012; Boellstorff et al., 2012; Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), 2015; Snee, 2013); however, available protocols and guidelines are scarce and at large generically applied, despite recent calls for an ongoing debate and dialogue of ethical conduct of online research (Flicker et al., 2004; Stainton, 2017; Whitehead, 2007 and Holmes, 2009). The AoIR (2012), for example, has attempted to address the issue of ethics within Internet research. However, rather than provide explicit guidelines, they suggest that traditional ethical principles are followed where possible and that an individual assessment is undertaken on each study involving Internet research. In doing so, they

suggest that researchers make ethical considerations with regard to how the context is assessed; who is involved in the study; what is the primary object of study; how data are stored, managed and represented; how texts, persons or data are being studied; how findings are presented; any harms or risks associated with the study; the potential benefits of the study; and any issues that may arise involving vulnerable people. While the adaptation of traditional ethical principles may be appropriate in some instances, it can be argued that with the scope of opportunities for the development of online methodologies now available to researchers, these principles may not always suffice. ESRC (2015) Framework for Research ethics has recognised some of the new or unfamiliar ethics questions and dilemmas associated with online research, but fails to provide clear guidelines beyond the requirement that a full ethics review should take place prior to the data collection process. Although this may give researchers a little more direction, it can be argued that this approach of utilising standardised rules and principles is not sufficient when research involves the use of methodologies that are of a unique or under-researched nature, such as travel blog analysis.

Kitchin (2007) distinguishes between online research and web-based research (which is split into non-intrusive and engaged research) and argues that each type of Internet-based research faces different ethical dilemmas and practices depending on the level of engagement of researchers and the role they play in the research context, where an increased level of interaction between researchers and participants leads to more complex ethical issues and challenges. Non-intrusive web-based research is considered to be when there is no interaction between the participants and the researchers, and the research relies entirely on the analysis of existing data. During engaged web-based research, on the other hand, there is interaction between the researchers and the participants to clarify the existing data or to ensure understanding. On the other side of the continuum is online research where researchers are not only observers, but also active participants in the research context (Kitchin, 2007). This echoes Buchanan's (2011: 92) observation that 'a continuum of online research is emerging'; whereas on one extreme the research is seen as not subject-based at all, on the other end, there is an increased concern regarding potential risks for the research participants. This emphasises the blurred dynamics of online research and its associated ethical considerations, further indicating the need for the development of a set of guidelines specific to the particular methodology employed.

Is travel blog research human subject research or not?

Some of the ethical dilemmas and challenges in Internet research originate from the lack of clarity about 'whether people in the online world are the subjects of research ... or authors of works ... which they have knowingly put into the public domain for information and comment' (Oates, 2006:

65). Various studies (Canadian Institute of Health Research (CIHR) et al., 2010; Walter, 2002) also indicate that research of non-intrusive nature where cyber-material such as documents, records, performances and online archival materials publicly available and analysed without any interaction between the researcher and the participants differs from the traditionally so-called human subject research.

Although it is by no means clear-cut, it can be, therefore, argued that despite travel blogs being written by human participants, this material is in the public domain and is thus not human data (ESRC, 2012). Moreover, the lack of interaction between the human participants and the researchers suggests that ethical guidelines applicable to human participants are less valid within travel blog analysis (CIHR et al., 2010). However, it can also be argued whether blog content neatly fits into either segment and that the content is neither an author nor a subject. In fact, the Internet complicates the realities of personhood, and it can be suggested that rather than fitting into either of the above categories, a blog can be seen as a digital extension of the self (Markham and Buchanan, 2012). Snee (2013), for example, viewed bloggers as the authors within her study of the narratives of young people taking a gap year, but the blog content as the author's public documents.

Travel blogs are written for a number of different purposes and as such should be ethically examined individually. Take the traditional association that blogs have with diaries, for example. While this may provide rich and valuable data, it can be argued that the very nature of a diary is that it consists of private and personal entries written by the owner. It would be unethical to utilise somebody's diary for research purposes without seeking permission should this be tangible, even if the diary was left in a public space, yet these ethical views are not generally applied to travel blogs that effectively act as 'online diaries'. This highlights not only the differences between ethical approaches to online and offline data sources, despite the often-similar nature that they may have, but also the different blog types. As such, while the presented ethical guidelines in this article may be better suited to online as opposed to offline research, it is important to note that due to the diverse nature of blogs, these guidelines are intended to be flexible in correspondence with the data type.

Private or public space?

It is argued by some researchers (Thurlow et al., 2004) that privacy issues represent the most important ethical hurdle for online researchers. The simplicity of the division between public and private Internet data complicates the issue even further, as research perceived as non-intrusive conducted in public spaces does not require to be scrutinised for ethical issues in the same way as research conducted in private spaces (CIHR et al., 2010). Furthermore, in some instances, it might avoid the ethical review process altogether (Madge, 2007).

This debate is problematic, however, as there is no clear definition of what is 'private' on the Internet, and it can be suggested that there is a lack of awareness about who can access online communications and who cannot (Hudson and Bruckman, 2005), meaning that some people may post content in the public domain without the intentions of it being publicly accessible. In many instances, for example, non-intrusive research is compared to research conducted in public spaces such as parks, town squares and shopping centres where it cannot be expected from people around the partaking parties not to pay attention to the conversation when they are close enough to listen in (Kitchin, 2007).

In the context of travel blogging, however, this should not, at large, be an issue as the very nature of blogging is to publicly publish content, and it can be assumed that most travel bloggers are aware of this when they create and manage their websites. What may not be as clear, however, is whether the information is 'psychologically private'. Frankel and Siang (1999) proposed that there are two distinct types of privacy within Internet research: technological and psychological. If a travel blog post is technologically private, a reader would require a password or a unique link to access it. As the majority of travel bloggers manage their websites themselves, it can be assumed that they will be aware of any technological privacy, and this therefore is not deemed a significant issue within travel blog analysis. There are, however, several considerations to be made by researchers regarding psychological privacy.

Psychological privacy suggests that the travel bloggers may post content that is viewed as personal or private, and although they may be aware that it has been posted within the public domain, they have no intentions of their personal information to be viewed by the many and potentially used for research purposes, despite the argument by Hewson et al. (2003) that data that have been made deliberately and voluntarily available in the public Internet domain could be used for research purposes under the condition that participants' identity is protected (Madge, 2007).

An example of psychological privacy can be when a travel blogger chooses to hide their identity; they may not want to be affiliated with the blog content, and thus, their association remains private. Furthermore, the concept of perceived privacy is worthy of discussion. Online contributors often have unrealistic expectations of privacy and confidentiality that are unlikely to reflect the reality (Warrell and Jacobsen, 2014). What one person may perceive as being private, another may not, for instance, the backpacker may produce their blog with the intentions of only their family viewing it, thus perceiving it as private, and although publicly available, they do not consider the possibility that people they do not know may also view the content. Another travel blogger, however, such as the person running their blog for monetary value, may be very aware of the potential publicity of what they publish because the content is situated in the public domain.

Often it is a judgement call of the travel blog researcher and/or the research ethics approval panel as to what constitutes public and what constitutes private online space, but in making this decision, Warrell and Jacobsen's (2014) set of questions could be considered: (1) what type of information is being shared (simple facts and everyday conversations, or personal and intimate) and (2) is the online space password protected or not. In essence, the argument is not necessarily about whether the blog content is public or private, rather it is about making sensible and ethical decisions based upon the content being reviewed.

Informed consent

One of the most frequent references to ethics within social research refers to the importance of gaining informed consent (e.g. Huberman and Miles, 1994; Punch, 2014; Seale, 2012), whereby questions such as when is informed consent required, how can it be obtained, and how can it be validated (Frankel and Siang, 1999: 7) arise. Informed consent is based upon the principle that individuals are given the opportunity to decide whether they wish to participate in the research or not. In order for consent to be 'informed', the reason for the study, the requirements of the participants and any potential harm or risks must be explained (Seale, 2012). Human subject research norms such as informed consent, however, do not apply to public, published material, and as such, consent is not required when analysing traditional texts such as newspapers and literature (Bradley and Carter, 2012; Snee, 2013). Moreover, it could prove impossible to obtain informed consent for already existing information in online settings due to intentional or unintentional lack of traces of the author (Punch, 2014; Warrell and Jacobsen, 2014). Whereas there are clear boundaries when reviewing texts such as a newspaper article, as demonstrated in the previous paragraph, these boundaries are blurred when it comes to blog analysis. One could view a blog as secondary data source, where the material has been published in line with a newspaper article or a magazine, for example. If this view is taken, this does not require travel blog researchers to obtain informed consent as this is perceived as non-intrusive based research (Kitchin, 2007).

Finally, it can be questioned whether contacting travel bloggers in order to gain consent to use their blog content for research purposes is appropriate. Many bloggers choose to provide little or no detail of who they are and how they can be contacted. This indicates that they may not wish to be disturbed. Furthermore, blogs are available in the public domain; therefore, a blogger may feel that it is unnecessary for a researcher to contact them to ask permission to use their content as they are aware that the content is available publicly. Sending permission requests to bloggers may also be viewed as spam, as being intrusive or as an invasion of the bloggers' privacy (Hewson et al., 2003) and consequently influence participants behaviour should they wish not to be subjects of a research study (Warrell and Jacobsen, 2014).

Anonymity and authorship

It is widely accepted that participants in offline research retain ownership over their words originating from the notion that they have the right to have their contribution withdrawn from a piece of research prior to publishing it. This denotes that if online research is seen in the same way as offline research, travel bloggers should have the same ‘ownership’ rights and receive credits for their work. If, however, travel blog research is seen as ‘textual analysis’ of data with no-restrictive access, the obligation towards the author(s) should not be of concern (Bradley and Carter, 2012; Warrell and Jacobsen, 2014). However, the latter perspective is challenged by some as the existence of any ‘text’ understandably suggests the existence of a human author towards whom researchers have certain obligations and responsibilities (Harre, 1992; Warrell and Jacobsen, 2014). In contrast, there may be some cases, such as those writing personal diary-based blogs, for example, where authors might have the desire to stay anonymous (Liu, 2010). This resonates Bruckman’s (2002) argument that Internet users should be perceived as ‘amateur artists’ who should receive credit for the work they do should they wish so.

Based on the above viewpoints, the decision as to whether to reveal participants’ identity and give them credit for their work or to keep them anonymous is a complex one, where context along with researchers’ ethical and philosophical position and recommendations from ethical committees are crucial (Madge, 2007; Warrell and Jacobsen, 2014). As such, it is recommended that each blog type is analysed in correspondence with suggested ethical guidelines while paying specific consideration to nature of the blogs being examined in order to justify the most suitable approach.

Proposed ethical guidelines for travel blog research

Overall, it can be seen that while there are broad ethical discussions that have taken place, none provide the travel blog researcher with clear guidelines from which to work. In an attempt, therefore, to contribute to the debate and to provide a basis from which travel blog researchers can ground their ethical principles, a set of six guidelines have been produced encompassing the arguments presented in this article while allowing for the flexibility and adaptation that is needed for different blog types and different types of research.

1. Informed consent

This should be considered on an individual basis and will vary depending on the nature of research. As a general guide, informed consent is not necessary for those who have knowingly published the content to be researched in the public domain. However, content that is of a particularly private or personal nature should be considered individually and

assessed as ‘psychologically private’ if deemed necessary by the researcher.

2. Author or subject

The researcher should decide whether the content used for research purposes acts as a primary data source (i.e. the travel blog content is the ‘subject’) or from a secondary data source (i.e. the travel blog content acts as the author). This will be dependent upon the research design and outcomes and will affect whether the travel blogger is anonymous or whether credit is attributed to them. This should be clearly explained and justified by the researcher.

3. Online and offline principles

If the travel blog examined can be seen as the same as an offline data source, for instance, a diary, then the ethical principles should be no different whether the content is located online or offline.

4. Duty of care

Travel blog researchers should be conscious of the potential authors or contributors of the blog, and if it is suspected that they may be a member of a vulnerable community or indicates that the blog was not intended for public or research purposes, the researcher should apply a traditional ethical approach.

5. Data protection

In large, this is not applicable to travel blogs, whereby the content is publicly available on the Internet although individual consideration should be made depending on the nature of the blogs. Data interrogation and analysis should be stored in a safe, secure and private place.

6. Accuracy of data obtained

If there is a risk that data may not be entirely accurate or are not verifiable, this should be noted as a limitation by the researcher.

The above guidelines have been produced to enable travel blog researchers with some sense of direction, as opposed to dichotomous obligation. Following the recommendations of the AoIR (2012), it is recommended within travel blog research that the core ethical principles should be applied, but that these are then tailored to the specific needs of the research context. While these proposed guidelines, however, can operationally act as a useful basis from which the ethical blog researcher can work, it is important to note that they are not without their limitations. Most notably, this is the subjective interpretation of the blogs, their intended audience and the authorship. It is also important to note that while these proposed guidelines

may be a useful starting point for the researcher, it is important that the ethical approach is adapted to suit the needs of the specific blog types under examination in relation to the aims of the research at hand. Ethical judgement in Internet, and subsequently blog research, inevitably relies on inductive, contextual assessment of the specific case in question, and it is important to highlight that different ethical choices may be equally as legitimate and sound (Lomborg, 2013).

Conclusion

As demonstrated throughout this article, utilising blogs as a method of data collection, in our experience, required thoughtful and reflective analysis in order to address any potential ethical implications. Our experiences raised an abundance of questions that we have subsequently addressed in the preceding paragraphs. We have concluded that although to take an individual approach to ethically analysing blogs is evidently the most suitable, it is beneficial if researchers have a foundation from which to base their decisions. Therefore, this article contributes to the existing body of literature by proposing a set of guidelines for social researchers, choosing to adopt travel blog analysis as their chosen research method to work from.

While debates on the suitability of the current regulatory structure of ethics bureaucracy within academia continue, for now researchers must work within the framework that they are provided and succumb to the processes necessary in order to achieve the correct permissions to undertake their work. In light of this, this article has outlined the key concerns for researchers choosing to analyse travel blogs. As outlined in this article, there are a range of methodological research approaches utilising the Internet as a means of data collection that are emerging in parallel with the increased use of the Internet in society. While these data may yield valuable data that previously may have been unavailable to the researcher, however, it is clear that the current ethical boundaries are unclear. This article therefore contributes to the limited body of methodological literature addressing blog analysis as a method of data collection, addressing some of the current ambiguities surrounding ethical online research and subsequently providing a set of flexible, yet informed guidelines for researchers to work from. This can be argued essential in a world of increasing scrutiny in research ethics.

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