The 'Battle of Stokes Croft' on YouTube: The development of an ethical stance for the study of online comments

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Contributor biography

Dr Paul Reilly is a lecturer in Media and Communication at the University of Leicester. He specialises in the study of online political communication, with a specific interest in how social media is used to promote better community relations in divided societies. He has written one book on the role of the internet in conflict transformation in Northern Ireland (Framing the Troubles Online: Northern Irish Groups and Website Strategy, Manchester University Press 2011) and is currently writing his second on the role of social media in promoting positive intercommunity relations in the region (due 2014). His work has been published in a number of journals including Policy and Internet and Urban Studies. His current research projects include a study of YouTube comments posted in response to footage of the 'anti-tesco' riots in Bristol and analysis of the campaigns of UK online disability activists. He has also organised a knowledge exchange seminar for the Economic Social Research Council and has been an invited speaker at events organised by the Arts Marketing Association (East Midlands) and Royal United Services Institute.

Relevant Disciplines

Media and Communication; Political Science

Methods

Qualitative Data Analysis

Academic Level

Advanced Undergraduate; Postgraduate

Keywords

YouTube, comments, ethics, content analysis

Abstract

The UK national media framed the riot in the Stokes Croft area of Bristol on 21 April 2011 as a manifestation of the local campaign against the opening of a Tesco supermarket in Cheltenham Road, an arterial route through the area. New media technologies enabled alternative perspectives on these events to emerge that not only rejected this link, but also criticised the 'heavy-handed' policing operation in the Telepathic Heights squat to remove petrol bombs that were allegedly being prepared for use against the supermarket. This project set out to examine whether the use of Youtube to share acts of 'inverse surveillance' elicited support for the viewpoints of local residents that had been largely absent from the media coverage of the disturbances. This case study will be used to explore the ethical dilemmas that arise from the analysis and presentation of user-generated content in academic publications. The strict ethical stance adopted for this project, which through the decision not to directly quote participants went far beyond conventional approaches towards the removal of Personally Identifiable Information, will be elucidated with a view to identifying best practice for the analysis of Youtube comments.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this article students will start to make sense of:

1) The ethical dilemmas that emerge from the study of YouTube comments

2) The challenges associated with protecting participants from any additional harm that may arise from the use of their data

3) The strategies that may be employed in order to manage this risk to unaware participants

4) The questions that students need to consider when devising their own ethical stance towards social media research

The 'Battle of Stokes Croft'

In order to fully understand the ethical stance outlined in this paper, one must first explore the context in which this footage was recorded, shared and commented upon. Purported eyewitnesses took to sites such as Bristol Indymedia in the days following the riot to condemn the 'unfathomable' tactics adopted by the Avon and Somerset Constabulary during the controversial raid on the Telepathic Heights squat and the subsequent disturbances in the area. They rejected Assistant Chief Constable Rod Hansen's portrayal of the 'positive action' taken by the police and questioned his claims that the police had removed petrol bombs from the squat that were intended for use against the controversial Tesco store (Hall, 2011). The deployment of the police helicopter over the area was one of many measures said to have escalated tension in the area between local residents and the officers in attendance. A second night of violence in the Stokes Croft area on the 29th April was linked to a protest organised by local residents to voice their opposition towards the police operation a week earlier. The news media were also criticised for conflating the peaceful anti-Tesco protests with the riots through their 'copying and pasting' of police press releases into their coverage (Gallagher, 2011). Claire Milne from The No Tesco in Stokes Croft group

was quick to condemn the violence in the local media but acknowledged that local residents were angry at their 'voices not being listened to' (Bristol Evening Post, 2011). Indeed, the campaign had organised a survey in March 2010 that found 93 percent of local residents opposed the opening of the supermarket in the area. Together with the local community association, the People's Republic of Stokes Croft, the group used its blog and Facebook page to outline their concerns for the sustainability of independent businesses in the area once the new Tesco store had opened. It was therefore no surprise that local residents would use social media to provide alternative perspectives on the events later dubbed the 'Battle of Stokes Croft.'

Research Design

This study analysed the YouTube footage of the riot through the theoretical framework of sousveillance, a form of inverse surveillance that empowers citizens through their use of technology to 'access and collect data about their surveillance' (Mann et al, 2003:333). It was anticipated that both personal and hierarchical forms of sousveillance would be present in the eyewitness perspectives of the 'Battle of Stokes Croft' uploaded to YouTube. The latter, which focused specifically on recording the actions of authority figures, was pertinent to the debate over whether the police operation was 'heavy-handed.' However, it was also acknowledged that online viewers might treat this content as a form of sousveillance even if that was not the original intention of the witness.

The study explored the extent to which this footage appeared to generate sympathy amongst commenters towards the local residents who had criticised the 'heavy-

handed' police operation. In particular, it focused on whether the commenters themselves perceived these videos as a form of hierarchical sousveillance. A corpus of 72 videos was identified on Webometric Analysis through the use of relevant key word searches. The next step was to filter out content, such as news media coverage of the riot, which did not meet the requirements of the project. This left a total of 52 videos that showed eyewitness perspectives on the police actions during the disturbances on 21 April 2011. The four most commented upon videos, all of which appeared to corroborate the claims made by local residents on Bristol Indymedia in relation to the 'unfathomable' police tactics, were selected for analysis (see Table 1). The footage showed the police moving up and down Cheltenham Road to the bemusement of onlookers, the convoy of police vehicles and the police helicopter whose presence had caused so much anger amongst local residents, and a series of clashes between bystanders and riot police from multiple perspectives. There were also several incidents of vandalism captured on camera including an attack on a police vehicle by a group of hooded individuals and their subsequent use of burning debris to block the road as the riot police move towards them. It should be noted that in all of these videos eyewitnesses can be heard condemning this anti-social behaviour, such as one bystander shouting "Pacifism - stop being violent" at a man in a red baseball cap who pushes over a car trailer (Bristol Stokes Croft Riot). The peaceful protest of local residents at the Telepathic Heights squat eviction are captured on camera and there appears to be an awareness of the potential use of this content as a form of sousveillance amongst the many bystanders who are seen filming the actions of the riot police on their mobile phones.

<<Table 1 here>>

The commenters represented only a fraction of the total online audience who had viewed this content, as demonstrated by the significantly greater number of views compared to comments left by users. YouTube's API only allowed for access to the last 1,000 comments meaning that 652 of the earliest ones could not be included in the study (Youtube, 2012). The comments were exported into an Excel spreadsheet and read to ensure that only those that demonstrated some form of engagement with the events captured in this footage remained. The Bristol Stokes Croft riot video in particular generated much debate between two users about the way in which the riot had been handled by the Avon and Somerset Constabulary. However, the purpose of the study was to look at how individual viewers responded to the footage rather than the dynamics of these conversations. As per a previous study of YouTube comments (Antony and Thomas, 2011), those that used offensive language towards other viewers or the Stokes Croft community were excluded from the study. This left a total of 1018 text-based comments for analysis.

The comments were inductively coded as per previous studies of YouTube comments (Antony and Thomas, 2011; Chei Sian Lee, 2012). The criteria of forcefulness and repetition identified by Mark Orbe and Etsuko Kinefuchi were applied to each comment in the corpus. First, the phrases and words that were most frequently used by commenters in relation to both the policing of the riot and the alleged link between the anti-Tesco campaign and the violence were noted. The next step was to explore the forcefulness of these words and phrases by examining whether they were accompanied by derogatory language, written in upper case letters, or used excessive punctuation such as the use of exclamation marks. The study found that the majority of the comments were critical of the police for not doing more to prevent the riot and

showed little sympathy for the local residents who claimed the operation was heavy-handed. While YouTube clearly provided a space for alternative perspectives on the riot to emerge, the mainstream media and police framing of events appeared to strongly influence the viewers of most viewers.

Having considered how data was collected from YouTube and subsequently analysed, the rest of this paper is devoted to a discussion of the ethical issues that emerged from the use of this data. There were a series of questions that emerged from this process: Would informed consent be appropriate in order to use these comments in academic publication? What measures, if any, should be taken to protect the anonymity of these commenters? How should this data be presented in academic publications in light of these ethical dilemmas? Natasha Whiteman argues that questions such as these should be considered in the development of localised ethical stances, which take account of the context in which the research is conducted, rather than relying on the default option of using the overly prescriptive rules for online research set out by Institutional Review Boards and organisations such as the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). This paper presents what some may regard as a rather strict ethical stance. However, it does so in the knowledge that there is no right or wrong approach towards this issue with all researchers expected to justify the ethical stances they take in their research.

Social media content as human subject or text?

In order to outline an ethical approach towards the study of YouTube comments, one must first consider whether this content is a published artifact or the property of human participants (Markham, 2003). Clearly, if these contributions are treated as the

former then there is no need for the researcher to obtain informed consent from individual commenters (Kozinets, 2010). The data might be considered public by virtue of its publication on a site that can be easily accessed by other internet users (King, 1996). Yet, this technical approach towards the public/private status of online communities would appear ill-suited for the study of 'semi-public' sites such as Facebook, which host both public and private groups and require users to register with an email account to access their range of services (Sveningsson Elm, 2009; Whiteman, 2012). Researchers also need to consider the different expectations participants may have in relation to the publicness (or not) of the online environments in which they operate. Recent studies suggest that social media users face significant challenges negotiating the multiple and often overlapping audiences that view their online content, a phenomenon known as 'context collapse' (Baym and boyd, 2012; Marwick and boyd, 2011). Thus, it cannot be assumed that participants are comfortable with their comments being used in academic publications without their permission, even if they are hosted on sites that are widely perceived as 'public' spaces (Zimmer, 2010; Zimmer, 2012).

Previous research into the role of social media during the Egyptian and Tunisian uprisings in January 2011 and the (unrelated) disturbances in several English cities a few months later has arguably treated user-generated content as a published artefact through its identification of users in data visualisations without seeking their consent to do so prior to publication (Lotan et al, 2011a; Procter et al, 2011). These breaches of anonymity could be at least partially justified on the basis that much of this content had been produced by public figures, such as politicians and journalists, that typically have the power to control information about themselves (Kozinets, 2010). However,

concerns continue to be raised about the potential reputational harm to users identified in these studies that do not possess such resources (Krotoski, 2012). This may explain why user data that appeared in these visualisations was anonymised or omitted from subsequent academic publications (Lotan et al, 2011b; Procter et al, 2013). This reflects the centrality of the 'human subject' perspective, which recommends that steps be taken to protect participants from any harm that might arise from the use of their data, in most ethical guidelines for online research (Ess and AoIR Working Group, 2002; British Psychological Society, 2007). This perspective is also evident in the most recent iteration of the framework for ethical online research provided by the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), which states that online researchers may have to consider the principles of human subject research "even if it is not immediately apparent how and where persons are involved in the research data" (Markham, Buchanan, and AoIR Ethics Working Committee, 2012:4).

Although YouTube (2012) states explicitly in its Terms of Service that users should not expect 'confidentiality with respect to any content,' it was decided that the human subject perspective was the most appropriate framework for the study of YouTube comments in this project. As per previous work on internet research ethics (Bowker and Tuffin, 2004; Eysenbach and Till, 2001; Nissenbaum, 2010; Walther, 2002), this decision involved an assessment of any potential harm that these unaware participants would be exposed to through the use of their comments and the perceived level of privacy on the video-sharing website. The use of comments that expressed support for the rioters might have caused reputational harm to these participants and perhaps even led to their prosecution. This potential scenario was illustrated by the eight fold increase in the number of people charged with social media related offences in

England, Wales and Scotland between 2008 and 2012 (BBC, 2012) and individual cases such as the two men who were jailed for four years for inciting violence in Warrington town centre in August 2011 (Bowcott, Carter & Clifton, 2011). While acknowledging that researchers should not always set out to 'please' online participants, there did not appear to be a public benefit in exposing these unaware participants to potential harm through the use of their 'semi-published' comments as published artefacts (Bruckman, 2002; Herring, 1996).

Ethical frameworks for the study of online communities stipulate that researchers should either seek informed consent from participants prior to the data being used or anonymise datasets in order to protect their privacy (British Psychological Association, 2007; Ess and AoIR, 2002). The former was considered neither feasible nor appropriate for this study of comments posted on a publicly accessible site such as YouTube (Neuhaus and Webmoor, 2011). The latter, involving the removal of Personally Identifiable Information (PII) from the dataset, was seen as the most effective way of managing the risks associated with the use of semi-published content created by unaware participants.

To quote or not to quote?

The removal of PII such as username, age, or gender from datasets would appear a relatively easy way of protecting the privacy of unaware participants. Yet, the re-identification of these users may be possible if too much information relating to their cultural or political identity is disclosed. Michael Zimmer uses the example of the "Tastes, Ties, and Times" (T3) project, which saw a group of U.S. researchers publish data taken from the Facebook accounts from an entire cohort of college students in

2008, to illustrate these concerns. Despite the removal of Personally Identifiable Information such as the student names from the dataset, disclosures in the codebook in relation to the cohort size led to Harvard College being identified as the 'anonymous northeastern university' that featured in the study. The T3 researchers were subsequently criticised for their failure to protect the privacy of these participants who presumably were unaware that their data would be used in the project.

 The use of direct quotes may also allow readers to locate the original comments using search engines such as Google (Markham, 2012). Hence, organisations such as the British Psychological Society recommend that they should only be used if the participant has "fully understood and consented to this" (British Psychological Society, 2007: 4). On this basis, it was decided that it would be prudent not to use direct quotes that might make it easier to identify unaware participants who had commented on the YouTube footage of the Stokes Croft riot.

A number of alternative strategies for the presentation of results were considered. One such practice was Annette Markham's suggestion that researchers should write composite accounts that convey broad themes from the data but do not provide rich descriptions of individual units of analysis. However, there were concerns about the possibility of creating an idealised version of events that were "too clean and tidy" (Markham, 2012: 344). Results indicated that there was a diversity of responses to these videos, which were both supportive and critical of the police operation for very different reasons. It was not clear the extent to which composite accounts would allow these voices to be heard. A similar critique emerged in relation to the use of word

visualisations, which show themes that emerge from datasets. Probably one of the most well-known manifestations of the 'Big Data' phenomenon, the full implications of which remain uncertain for social science research (for a review of this debate see Boyd and Crawford, 2012), it is a creative solution to the potential problems associated with the use of these comments without ethical consent from participants (Rogers, 2010). Yet, word visualisations only allow the reader to see the words that most frequently appeared in the dataset out of context (McNaught and Lam, 2010). Like the fabrication strategy, this approach was ruled out because it was felt that examples were needed to illustrate how these commenters engaged with the events captured on camera and whether they perceived this footage as a form of hierarchical sousveillance.

It was decided that participants would not be identified either via username or a pseudonym and their comments would be paraphrased in order to illustrate key themes that emerged from the dataset. They would only be identifiable in relation to the video under which they had been posted. In this way, the study employed a strategy that attempted to provide the maximum level of disguise possible for these unaware participants (Bruckman, 2002: Kozinets, 2010). It was based on an assessment that the potential risks associated with the use of direct quotes without the consent of their authors outweighed any public benefit that might arise from this approach. This strict ethical stance not only conformed to the 'do no harm' principle implicit in many of the ethical frameworks for online research but also met the requirements of the study. It was important that the results were presented in such a way as to allow the reader to view the key themes that emerged in these comments in relation to the policing of the Stokes Croft riot. The granularity provided by direct

quotes was not considered necessary in order to achieve this objective. Instead, the paraphrasing of these comments would allow for the voice of participants to be heard without exposing them to any potential harm.

Conclusion

Natasha Whiteman argues in favour of constructed rather than natural ethical stances that draw on the values and expectations of not only the academy but also the researched (p.141). This sociological approach informed many of the ethical decisions that are outlined in this paper. While the collection of data was a relatively straightforward procedure involving one of the many software packages designed for social media research, the presentation of results required much more reflection upon the costs and benefits of using this data without the consent of its authors. What has been articulated in this paper is an ethical stance that sought to provide the maximum level of disguise possible to participants via the removal of usernames and direct quotes from subsequent academic publications. The logistical problems associated with securing informed consent from these participants were addressed through the paraphrasing of comments rather than their verbatim reproduction. While it is true to say that no such strategy can ever fully guarantee anonymity for participants, this approach at least made it harder for these comments, many of which used offensive language to describe the ways in which the Avon and Somerset Constabulary responded to the Stokes Croft riot, to be located using search engines. The identification of users through the verbatim reproduction of their comments might have inflicted reputational harm upon them. This practice might also have led to these unaware participants facing criminal charges for what were 'semi-published' comments about the behaviour of the police during the events on 21 April 2011.

This is not the only ethical stance that could be adopted for the study of social media data. Indeed, some researchers would have used direct quotes from this dataset in academic publications on the basis that YouTube is widely perceived to be a 'public' online space. Others might dispute the notion that scholarly research should develop strategies in order to protect online participants from the negative consequences that might occur as a result of their online behaviours. This reflects the subjective nature of qualitative research and the difficulty in prescribing universal rules for researchers that define what is (and is not) ethical practice. A key point that emerges from the preceding analysis is that researchers must explicitly justify the decisions they take with reference to the ethical frameworks of not only their institutions but also the online communities that are the focus of their studies. This doesn't mean that the default position should be to please participants through the redaction of potentially harmful content from datasets. Rather, researchers need to assess each specific research context and tailor their ethical stance accordingly. They should weigh up the public benefit of verbatim reproduction of social media texts against the potential risks associated with the use of this data without the informed consent of its authors. Factors such as the contextual notions of privacy held by participants, the perceived openness of online platforms, and the requirements of the study should all be explored as part of this process. In this way, this paper has shown the importance of empowering researchers to make informed ethical decisions that protect the right to privacy for unaware participants when it is appropriate to do so.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

PURPOSE	To help you synthesise and apply ethical guidelines provided by the Association of Internet Researchers and your University in the study of social media datasets.
	The output of this task will help your supervisor to provide you with appropriate support.
	The output (after discussion with your supervisor) can be used to help you reflect on your research design (e.g. for the collection and analysis of data from social media sites such as Facebook, and Twitter) and should help you prepare the method chapter in the final version of your dissertation.
Time	Approximately 30 - 45 minutes.
Task	First go to your University's code of ethics at and read the university guidelines.
	Compare these guidelines to those provided by the Association of Internet Researchers (http://aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf)
	Consult the research methods section of the dissertation proposal form that you have submitted for your project.
	Identify whether there are any ethical issues that may arise from your chosen method and the proposed subject(s) of your study
Recommended time-scale to do this task	The earlier you complete this task, the more beneficial it will be for your project.
Response / Output	Write in less than 100 words the ethical issues you have identified and how you plan to address them in your project. Email this summary to your supervisor ahead of your next meeting.

For a list of discussion questions please see the guidelines provided by the

Association of Internet Researchers (http://aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf).

Further Readings

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