

# Recent Ethical Challenges in Social Network Analysis

Organized session at the XXXVIII Sunbelt conference, Utrecht, 26 June – 1 July 2018

## *Background*

Research on social networks raises formidable ethical issues that existing regulations, guidelines and codes of conduct struggle to address. It is particularly problematic to ensure informed consent (as relationships reported by participants may concern non-participants, possibly unaware of the research) and anonymization (which cannot be achieved at the data collection stage, which must include personal identifiers, but only *ex post*).

While researchers have engaged with these issues (notably with a special issue of *Social Networks*, 2005 and a panel at the 2015 Sunbelt conference in Brighton, UK), new challenges arise today with increased availability of relational data from digital platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. The boundaries between “public” and “private” spheres blur, platforms’ algorithms affect users’ behaviors in ways that are not always transparent to researchers, and information sources are often owned by commercial firms unwilling to share them. Paid “crowdsourcing” (recruiting people through platforms such as Amazon Mechanical Turk to do tasks that may range from answering questionnaires to downloading their full online contact lists) enables researchers to produce extra data, but leaves open the question of contributors’ working conditions. Possible consequences include barriers to data access, inequalities between researchers (possibly to the advantage of corporate R&D over publicly-funded research), and a sense of uncertainty which may hamper otherwise beneficial social studies.

## *The session*

Following a successful workshop on this topic that was held in December 2017 in Paris, this organized session offers a space for researchers to discuss these issues. We **welcome submissions that critically engage with ethics in research related to social networks**, possibly based on **reflective accounts of first-hand experiences** or case studies, taken as concrete illustrations of the general principles at stake, the attitudes and behaviors of stakeholders, or the legal and institutional constraints.

We are particularly interested in **novel, original answers to some unprecedented ethical challenges**, or the **need to re-interpret norms in ambiguous situations**.

*The following is a non-exhaustive list of themes:*

- Social network research and individual/fundamental rights
- Ethics and codes of conduct of innovative fields of research in social network analysis
- Culture and values in international and comparative social network research
- Respect of participants in research on sensitive populations, problematic behaviors, covert networks
- Anonymity, privacy, and security in social network analysis
- Impact and risks of publishing network data
- Psychological impact and other risks for research participants
- Dialogue between public and private sector researchers
- Complying with regulatory efforts in social network analysis
- Dealing with risks and threats for the researcher
- Personal and institutional responsibility in research

### *Practicalities*

Abstracts must be submitted on or before **1 February 2018**, through the conference's online portal: <https://sunbelt.sites.uu.nl/abstract-submission/>

Abstracts must not exceed 500 words, not including the title (and please do not include references). Please indicate explicitly that you are submitting for the organized session "Recent challenges in social network analysis".

### *Organizers*

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