Recent Ethical Challenges in Social Network Analysis

Special section of *Social Networks*

Guest-edited by Paola Tubaro, Antonio A. Casilli, Alessio D'Angelo, Louise Ryan

Research on social networks raises formidable ethical issues that often fall outside existing regulations and guidelines. State-of-the-art tools to collect, handle, and store personal data expose both researchers and participants to new risks. Political, military and corporate interests interfere with scientific priorities and practices, while legal and social ramifications of studies of personal ties and human networks come to the surface.

The proposed special section aims to critically engage with ethics in research related to social networks, specifically addressing the challenges that recent technological, scientific, legal and political transformations trigger.

Background

The specificities of research on social networks do not accommodate well with existing regulations, guidelines and codes of conduct. 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, where personal identifiers are necessary, but only *ex post*).

While researchers have already engaged with these issues (notably with a special issue of *Social Networks*, edited by Professor Ronald Breiger in 2005), new challenges arise today with increased production of relational data through 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. Technology-enabled opportunities can be double-edged swords: for example, researchers can now produce data through paid "crowdsourcing" (recruiting service providers through platforms such as Amazon Mechanical Turk to do tasks that may range from answering questionnaires to downloading their full online contact lists), but this raises the question of contributors' working conditions.

In short, the data do not speak for themselves, and we must consider the conditions of their use, production and extraction as well as the software architectures and business models of platforms. Possible consequences include barriers to data access, inequalities between researchers (with a potential advantage for corporate R&D over publicly-funded science), and a general sense of uncertainty which may hamper otherwise beneficial social studies.

The special section

Following a successful [workshop on this topic that was held in December 2017 in Paris](#), this journal special section 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 special section will include 7-12 articles as well as an introduction by the editors, and a concluding comment by Professor Ronald Breiger.

Indicative list of themes

- *Ethical standards*
  Fundamental rights; changes in legal framework and their impact of social networks research; issues with the current functioning of Institutional Review Boards, and how researchers can cope with them; sharing international best practices; developing guidelines.

- *Impacts and audiences*
  Ethical issues arising from returning research results to study participants, and/or from communicating results to policymakers, stakeholders, and the wider public; impact and risks of publishing network data.

- *Online research and social media*
  Changes in the notions of informed consent and anonymization with data from digital platforms; data quality issues; negotiations between researchers and platforms.

- *Economic and political risks and threats*
  Appropriation of data or results for non-scientific purposes; military, political and corporate funders or stakeholders; dialogue between public and private sector researchers; handling network data from whistleblowing; crowdsourcing data production.

- *Social networks and health*
  The specific challenges of social networks research on health-related matters, to the extent that special and/or additional legal and ethical rules and norms apply.

- *Sensitive topics*
  Respect of both participants and researchers in studies of sensitive populations, problematic behaviors, covert networks.

Procedures

We plan to do a few rounds of informal, internal reviews to get papers to a very high standard before we submit them to the journal. For this purpose, we ask all prospective contributors to volunteer to peer-review one or more of the other submitted manuscripts.

Please send your intention to contribute by Friday, **4 May 2018** to paola.tubaro@inria.fr At this early stage, submissions should include title, names and affiliations of authors, and a 500-word abstract.

All submissions are refereed and proposed papers must not have been previously published elsewhere. Abstracts should clearly communicate what issue, development or problem is being investigated, how it is being investigated, what the

> findings are and what contribution is being made to knowledge. Please provide information about theoretical/epistemological positioning, methodology and data (if relevant); explain how your paper is within the scope of the planned special section.

Notifications of pre-acceptance are to be expected by 18 May 2018.

Pre-accepted authors will be invited to submit their full papers for internal review by guest editors and fellow contributors (deadline 15 October 2018). All full paper submissions must comply with the "Guide for Authors" of *Social Networks*. Notifications of decisions by 30 November 2018.

After that, authors invited to revise and resubmit will have time until 18 January 2019 to prepare their paper for official submission to the journal. From this point onwards, the reviewing process will be managed by *Social Networks*. This phase is expected to be completed in 2019, aiming at a publication in 2020 (issue TBC).

For any questions, please contact paola.tubaro@inria.fr