

Quick guide for research using websites, social media and online sources

Introduction

This quick guide is intended to highlight some key issues for consideration when carrying out research in particular focussed using social media platforms and sites that are interactive with posts and groups (for example, with user generated content) where there is a reasonable expectation of privacy. It is a working paper and will be updated, as and when new issues emerge.

Researcher requirements

You must submit an ethics application to your faculty research ethics committee (FREC) for research that will use social media platforms and similar online sources. This includes data from websites, social media and online sources that do and do not require a log-in. Examples include: Twitter, Facebook, Mumsnet, Reditt, Weibo (this list is not exhaustive).

You are required to be aware of the terms and conditions of the relevant source and to act within them unless there is a specific justification for not doing so, one which must be explained in your FREC application. The onus is on you, the researcher, to familiarise yourself with the terms and conditions of content providers **before** you submit an ethics application and to confirm to FRECs that your research will be operating within these confines (or explain why not is appropriate). If you are unsure whether your research complies with the site's terms and conditions, please contact the site for confirmation and provide these communications to the FREC.

Social media platforms' terms and conditions often contain clauses regarding how the user's data might be shared with third parties, and some may even detail that data shared on that platform can be used for research purposes for example this may be discussed in terms and conditions as the harvesting of data.

In most cases confirmation of compliance with these terms and conditions is expected. In exceptional cases where researchers are unable to ensure compliance, a rationale must be provided to the relevant FREC. For example, exceptional cases may be where there is a rationale for conducting valuable and beneficial research on crime/abuse/corruption.

Researchers need to consider the legal status of the material that they plan to work with and give due consideration regarding possible posts made by children.

Data privacy

Just because information is viewable online does not necessarily mean that it can be regarded as being in the public domain for the purposes of research. Researchers are expected to determine whether the user who posted the information would have a 'reasonable expectation of privacy' or whether the information has truly been placed in the public domain. There would be a **reasonable expectation of privacy** if, for example, you need to login to view users' comments or need to send a request to join a group.

The University expects all researchers to consider the concept of 'Privacy by Design' when formulating research proposals or methodologies. The concept of 'Privacy by Design' is to integrate data protection into your activities from design throughout the lifecycle of the data use. If you are uncertain about data protection issues please contact the [Information Governance team](#) **before** you submit your ethics application to your Faculty Research Ethics Committee.

Gaining consent

If a site requires a login to view the data, this means the data should be treated as private and informed consent must normally be obtained from participants.

You must carefully consider whether it is possible to obtain informed consent and whether it is required according to the site's policies. For example, where direct quotes are to be used from Twitter, Twitter's general guidance is that tweets should not be amended or anonymised. However, in research cases we understand that tweets can be amended/anonymized if it is necessary to protect research participants. **Additionally, you should consider the value of gaining informed consent, for example, if there is deemed to be a 'reasonable expectation of privacy' for individuals.** Also bear in mind that the more sensitive the data is (for example someone talking about a pregnancy termination or their experiences as a survivor of sexual assault) the greater value should be placed on gaining consent.

When carrying out research, the University expects researchers to inform participants wherever possible. Where researchers will not be informing participants, researchers will be required to justify this decision during ethical review: Examples of where it may be permissible to not inform research participants could include:

- where researchers are not collecting any personal or identifiable data;
- where it would take a disproportionate effort to inform all participants and the researcher is not collecting anything 'controversial' or sensitive;
- where to do so would harm the outcomes of the research, e.g. monitoring a well-known message board frequently used by criminals.

Additional information, providing more detailed guidance on gathering personal data from social media sites is available in the [Social Media Guidance for Researchers](#) section of the University's [General Data Protection Regulations \(GDPR\)](#) webpage.