The Ethics of Online Research Methods in Applied Linguistics:
Challenges, opportunities, and directions in ethical decision-making

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Today more than ever, data are widely accessible, visible and searchable, and thus available for research into new media contexts. At the same time, new and diverse data types, sources and collection methods challenge existing approaches to research ethics and raise significant and difficult questions for researchers who design, undertake and disseminate applied linguistic research in and about digital environments. Interest in the topic of internet research ethics is evident in acknowledgement of internet contexts in current recommendations for good practice by applied linguistics organisations (BAAL 2016), special mention of ethics-related issues in funding bids for methodological research projects (e.g. the 2015 ESRC call for NCRM Methodological Research Projects), and an increase in themed seminars and colloquia on the subject. This special issue arose from presentations and discussions on the ethics of online research methods, during a two-day workshop organised by the BAAL Special Interest Group in Language and New Media (16-17 April 2015, Cardiff University).

Despite this momentum, dedicated publications of original research papers that offer critical and detailed discussion of ethical considerations in online data collection and analysis remain scarce, particularly compared to publications on other (less methodologically-focused) areas of applied linguistic research into digital discourse and communication. This special issue fills that gap by bringing together original research papers that share three main aims: to identify key challenges in research design and practice; to situate such challenges within wider theoretical debates about research ethics; and to share critical insights into, as well as ways of addressing, ethical issues arising from ongoing research into language and new media.

These challenges in research ethics, design and practice should be viewed in relation to ongoing changes that intersect with, and shape, academic research and ethical decisions making. In this introductory paper, we contextualize and locate such changes in three main areas: (i) changes associated with the increasing expansion and differentiation of communication media and technologies and the communicative environments they afford; (ii) shifts in the conceptualization of selfhood and identity, already stirring fruitful debates in related disciplines of philosophy, sociology and cultural studies; and (iii) the shifting role and status of academic research and researchers in the contemporary world.

Starting with the shifting communicative environments afforded by the increasing expansion of media technologies, ethical decision-making is complicated by relatively new possibilities and constraints in accessing, recording and spreading information and content – or 'data', as most commonly referred to in research contexts. As noted by boyd (2011: 45) internet content can be automatically recorded and archived ('persistence'), duplicated and shared ('replicability'), be visible to known and unknown audiences ('scalability') and, most importantly, searched and found ('searchability'). These affordances create distinct communicative dynamics whereby

audiences become invisible and contexts collapse (Marwick and boyd 2011). In such environments where spatial, social and temporal boundaries become harder to define, assumptions about control over content and private-public distinctions are increasingly contested and questioned in the process of ethical decision-making.

In addition to changes related to technologies and communicative affordances, our responsibilities to informants depend on how we see the persons about whom (or, at times, with whom) we collect information. In other words, our ethical stance is conditioned by the theory of selfhood we ascribe to. For many years, ethical guidelines have conceptualized persons as autonomous individuals, attending to human dignity, safety and privacy as individual rights. Yet, approaching the self in isolation from the network of persons with whom one interacts runs counter to the ways in which people experience and construe their 'networked selves' (Papacharissi 2011) both online and offline. Insights into the networked self from cultural and media studies have paved the way for revisiting privacy in the context of research ethics, arguing for a more dynamic approach to privacy that places the self in the network of contacts and relationships developed and negotiated during and beyond the research process (Ess 2015).

Debates on research ethics and challenges in ethical decision-making are also heavily influenced by wider shifts in academic disciplines, as well as in the role of academia in contemporary society. Increasing accountability on the part of academics is evidenced in current requirements for research impact (including economic and societal impacts understood as 'the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and economy', RCUK 2014) and calls for open access to research outputs and data. Such shifts in academic practice are consequential to research ethics as they impact upon the processes of storing, making available and disseminating information related to persons researched. As for research on language and new media in particular, researchers find themselves in the unenviable position of negotiating data ownership not only with the persons researched but also with the private corporations (such as Google, Twitter, Facebook) that afford and, to some extent, control the information circulated. The recent lawsuit against the US Computer Fraud and Abuse Act which effectively constrains academic research to strictly abide by terms of service as defined by corporate websites (rather than abiding by wider ethical considerations that protect users and/or researchers) demonstrates the limits of current legal frameworks (Sandvig 2016).

In this context of challenges and opportunities for research on language and new media, the current issue paves the way for a more detailed and critical debate about internet research ethics within applied linguistics. By bringing together papers that draw on specific case-studies, this issue also calls for a fuller and more contextualized understanding of research ethics that contributes to revisiting and developing current approaches to ethics within applied linguistics more generally. The scope of this special issue includes ethical concerns related to a range of research methodologies (with a focus on more qualitative approaches to discourse analysis, narrative analysis, digital ethnography), research sites (from websites and online forums to messaging apps and media-sharing sites) and ethics-related topics, including anonymity and informed consent, perceptions of privacy and publicness, data protection and copyright, sensitive data and vulnerable groups.

Overall, the special issue sees the following areas as priorities for informing ethical decision-making in applied linguistic research:

- *Ethics as a contextualized process of decision-making at all critical junctures*: The first article (Georgakopoulou) sets the tone for the type of 're-ethicising' that a process-based approach to ethics can take in applied linguistics. Such re-ethicising often appears in the form of recurrent questions that we see in many of the articles: How have the original goals of the project and our relationships with participants developed? In what other ways has the research context shifted? What possible futures are being created by our research? If ethical dilemmas present, could we answer our research questions by looking at a different community? Georgakopoulou, for example, shows in her study of vernacular perspectives on the Greek crisis how ethical clashes – such as those created when a viral news story receives fresh momentum – are not always evident from the outset of a research project; while both Spilioti and Pihlaja, in their respective studies of a radio show website and a YouTube channel, point to the need to 're-ethicise' when online data is taken down and thus ceases to be in the public domain.
- *Revisiting privacy and publicness*: The time is ripe to revisit researchers' conceptualisations of publicness not in terms of *a priori* definitions (or prioritizing web corporate definitions) of what is public but by looking into users' perceptions and expectations, as evidenced through their behavior on a site. Giaxoglou, for example, explores the impact that shifts in the perceived boundaries between public and private spheres have on acts of public mourning and private grief, and thus the ethical issues that pertain, through analysis of a Facebook memorial page. We should also note that participants' expectations of publicness/privacy may also vary within and across sites, including the different areas of a web domain.
- *Researcher's self-reflexivity*: The role of the researcher is key to ethical research, in designing ethical projects, being aware of their own activist agenda and ideologies, and making decisions at critical junctures. Issues raised in the articles include whether a researcher can ever be unbiased, a question posed by Rüdiger and Dayter in their discussion of a forum for pick-up artists of which they disapprove. Can researchers such as these distinguish between communities that deserve data protection and those that don't, as well as their responsibility towards society and towards themselves?
- *Orientation to participants*: Researchers cannot assume that participants will share either their values or aims, including their conceptualisations and understandings of digitally-mediated interactions. This requires an orientation to participants, whether their views on the research process are obtained directly or indirectly. Tagg and Lyons et al detail the impact that their use of messaging apps to communicate with participants had both on their relationships with their participants and on the roles that participants could take on within the research project. Mackenzie explores how she responded to her growing understanding of the complex informational norms on Mumsnet through a 'reflexive linguistic' approach which utilizes discourse analysis to identify participants' norms and expectations.

What the articles in this special issue show is that the relative novelty and salience of digitally-mediated communication (either for researchers or for participants in their research, or both) shed new light on ethical and methodological concerns that are ultimately of wider significance across research into language use in context. In other

words, the challenges posed by these relatively new contexts for research, as discussed in these articles, can prompt researchers to re-examine their ethical conduct in research across contexts, both online and offline.

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