Messy Methods: Queer Methodological Approaches to Researching Social Media

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Abstract

This article sketches out a queer methodological approach for ethically researching social media websites such as Facebook. Detailing my experiences researching marriage equality on Facebook, I argue that queer theory can help researchers negotiate the public/private continuum that figures so heavily into digital research. During my study, I turned to queer theory to help me with ethical quandaries regarding my relationship with participants, recruitment, and data collection. I detail how, on the one hand, I identified as queer to potential participants, in an effort at being up-front with them; on the other hand, I grew uneasy that some of my Facebook friends would be confused by the fact that I was joining homophobic Facebook groups for the purpose of my research, and I opened up an additional Facebook account as a result. Ultimately, I argue that a queer methodology enables an understanding of how the public/private continuum influences multiple parts of the research process; complicates accepted methodological practices in productive ways; provides a productive lens for exploring social media as a research method.
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Social commentators have referred to 2012–2015 as being watershed years in the advancement of rights for LGBTQ individuals. During these years, President Obama stated that he supports marriage equality; the states in which marriage equality is legal jumped from five in 2011 to 36 as of this writing; and the Supreme Court issued decisions striking down the Defense of Marriage Act and upholding the reversal of Proposition 8 in California. On the heels of these events, many believe that supporters of LGBTQ rights have continued reason for optimism in the immediate years ahead. Behind every passed law or new measure, however, are stories of everyday activists who have advocated for their causes in less publicized ways. In 2012 alone, Kristin Russo and Dannielle Owens-Reid began answering questions about growing up gay on their Tumblr, "Everyone is Gay," and now tour college campuses to discuss LGBTQ-themed issues; Brian Ellner advocated for marriage equality-supportive legislation in Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, and Washington by starting The Four 2012, an organization that gained support through multiple YouTube videos, a strong Facebook presence, and an interactive Tumblr (Valinsky, 2012). Aside from their notable commitment to LGBTQ rights, what all of these activists have in common is that they turned to social media to advance their causes.

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While scholars have argued that social media sites represent important locations of rhetorical activity (Burgess & Green, 2009; Dietel-McLaughlin, 2009; O'Riordan & Phillips, 2007; Williams, 2009), methodological approaches for *researching* such sites requires continued scholarly attention. As more and more citizens are turning to social media platforms for civic work, rhetoric and composition must continue to develop methodological approaches that help study these online spaces. In particular, how do researchers ethically gather data from such sites, considering the tendency for users to treat online spaces as private interactions (McKee & Porter, 2009)? How might we use social media not only as sites of study but also as a *method* for conducting qualitative research? How can we adapt established research methods to better meet the needs of such dynamic spaces? In the following article, I draw on these questions to inform my discussion of research conducted on and through social networks. I argue that a queer methodology enables the kind of flexibility that social media-based research requires. Drawing on previous articulations of queer methodologies and epistemological stances, I trace how my own configuration of a queer methodology shaped my recent study of how people use Facebook and YouTube to make arguments regarding marriage equality.

Queer theory's rich tradition of interrogating the public and the private provided me with the framework for establishing connectivity between my methods, data, and theoretical approach. The resonances between queer theory and digital research practices in terms of publicity and privacy make queer methodologies particularly fruitful for online research. Social media, in particular, presents scenarios where research-related information becomes publicized to multiple sets of audiences. The texts that we study and the spaces in which we recruit participants are now often found online—and sometimes are not served by existing approaches and frameworks. Researchers will continue to use social media as a method for gathering data, and will need methodologies malleable enough to address the dynamism of these platforms.

Following in the tradition of Cheri L. Williams (1996) and others, I privilege my reflection on the research process over my study's findings in this article. As Williams wrestled with issues such as her professional commitment to her project (versus her personal reaction to the behavior she observed), I detail the complications I confronted as I researched social media sites. I specifically address how a queer methodology informed my negotiation of publicity and privacy on these sites, particularly in respect to data collection and researcher *ethos*. Building on rhetoric and composition's rich tradition of digital methodologies (Grabill, 2003; McKee & DeVoss, 2007; McKee & Porter, 2009), as well as recent studies that have legitimized sites of research, such as Facebook (Williams, 2009), and YouTube (Dietel-McLaughlin, 2009; Dubisar & Palmeri, 2010), I use my research project as a springboard for conceptualizing emerging methodologies in online spaces. This article offers researchers one possible avenue (among many) for constructing queer methodologies in ways that serve social media research.

1. Constructions of marriage equality on Facebook and YouTube

During a year-long study, I traced how marriage equality was being constructed on Facebook and YouTube. Through this study, I sought to learn how citizens were using both of these platforms—which allow for multimodal argumentation, community organizing, and the rapid spread of information—to enter into discourses regarding marriage equality.[1] Within the past decade, countless YouTube videos and Facebook posts have addressed the socio-cultural repercussions and rhetorical import of marriage equality. While some of these online texts have been generated by various media outlets, many others are authored by average citizens who desire to express their voices in a public forum. I limited my project to these "grassroots" texts, focusing on YouTube videos and Facebook group pages that engaged with the issue of marriage equality. Because critical/activist research practice advocates for intervention/participation in the site of research (Cushman, 1996; Sullivan & Porter, 1997) I posted comments to the videos and Facebook group pages. My research questions for this project included determining how digital technologies enable or constrain people's involvement/action in relation to civic issues; discerning people's goals in using digital media for civic participation; and gaining a better understanding of the rhetorical moves that people have found effective in advancing their cause(s).

I interviewed seven Facebook users and six YouTube users, drawing on James Porter's (2009) theory of digital delivery to analyze their online texts (i.e., Facebook group pages or YouTube videos). Porter's *topoi* of body/identity and distribution/circulation proved useful as lenses for thinking about how my participants tried connect with/persuade their

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[1] While securing the ability to marry is only one facet of a broader cultural and historical movement for LGBTQ rights, I believe it represents a significant moment in the zeitgeist when citizens are using varied rhetorical strategies to oppose or support a civic issue.