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# Reflecting on the risks and ethical dilemmas of digital research



Hayley Sparks\*, Francis L. Collins, Robin Kearns

School of Environment, The University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland, New Zealand

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## ABSTRACT

As technology continues to evolve, digital methods are increasingly becoming key components of social and cultural geographers' research toolkits. This paper explores the risky and uncertain dimensions of digital research by reflecting on an adverse ethical event which occurred in research involving young people and online dialogic diaries. Assemblage thinking is used to conceptually frame the data leakage event, the subsequent disruption of confidentiality, and the wide-ranging affects and effects that followed. Three particular issues which are critical for researchers working with digital methodologies to consider are highlighted: the ethical implications of procedural disruption, institutional responses within the neoliberal university, and researcher wellbeing. We conclude by advocating for researchers to continue to push boundaries with digital research but suggest that this needs to be undertaken in an informed way that takes account of the immanent potential for digital disruption.

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## 1. Introduction

Digital research methods are relatively new techniques that a rapidly growing number of geographers are incorporating into their toolkits. For qualitative social and cultural geographers, digital methods offer many novel opportunities potentially providing new ways of accessing participants, for capturing the generation of meaning about place, and for exploring the articulation of online and offline experience in everyday life. However, digital research also comes with substantial risks and uncertainties that are not fully addressed by conventional ethical planning and responses to methodology. This paper explores the risky and uncertain dimensions of digital research through reflecting on a case study of an adverse ethical event which occurred in research involving young people and online dialogic diaries.

The key issue we address is an occasion of data leakage, the subsequent disruption of confidentiality, and the wide-ranging affects and effects that followed. We reflect on this event through an emphasis on porosity and permeability that questions some of the seemingly contained and controlled features of digital worlds. At face value, and when given the assurances of information technology (IT) specialists, websites and other digital assemblages could be interpreted as appearing to be contained spaces or arrangements of data. Perceptions of containment are critical to the use of personal information in digital activities across a wide spectrum of life, but they are arguably even more pertinent to

digital research methodologies in which assurances are offered to participants and ethics committees that private information will remain confidential and not be circulated.

Despite the appearance of containment, however, seemingly impermeable spaces are necessarily articulated into wider social relations and at times can be manifestly holey. There are many high profile examples of digital data leakages over recent years, including 'WikiLeaks' at a global scale, as well as the leakage of personal information from a number of government departments in New Zealand, the national context we are working within.<sup>1</sup> These examples highlight the sometimes porous nature of online spaces and, by extension, the care that needs to be taken when employing new digital technologies for research purposes.

Drawing on the vocabulary of assemblage thinking (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988; Anderson and McFarlane, 2011), a data leakage can be conceived as a 'line of flight', a trajectory of escape and mutation that builds on, but also reconfigures, extant connections between entities.<sup>2</sup> Lines of flight, in this regard, draw attention to

<sup>1</sup> See for example: Keith Ng, a well-known Wellington-based blogger, used a public kiosk in the social welfare agency Work and Income New Zealand to reveal security lapses – 'MSD shuts Winz kiosks after lax security exposed', *New Zealand Herald*, 15 October 2012; a Ministry of Health administrator accidentally sent a spreadsheet with 24,000 private medical records to a group of pharmacists – 'Kiwi's private medical information spilled', *New Zealand Herald*, 02 October 2015.

<sup>2</sup> We are not able to develop a full account of assemblage thinking or lines of flight and their relationship to social research in this paper but we point the reader to the discussions that have taken place in *Dialogues in Human Geography* (volume 2, number 2), *Deleuzian Intersections: Science, Technology, Anthropology* (Jensen and Rødje, 2010) and *Deleuze and the Social* (Fuglsang et al., 2006) for further explication of this mode of thinking.

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [hayley.sparks@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:hayley.sparks@auckland.ac.nz) (H. Sparks).

connections between entities that were, perhaps, only implicit; they are processes of deterritorialisation that disrupt the seemingly homogenous and enclosed dimensions of bodies and alter the relationships between component parts and their capacities (Lorraine, 2010). Internet-based spatialities are indicative of this play between actual and recognised connections and boundaries and the constant potential for opening into wider relations through processes of bridging and leakage (van der Velden, 2015). Websites or social media platforms, such as Facebook for example, operate in a manner that presents them as distinct machines with specific controlled connections that are managed in an orderly fashion (Leszczynski and Wilson, 2013). At the same time, these arrangements are undergirded by an enormous array of 'interpenetrating multiplicities' that both support their capacities and raise challenges for control; the connections in all internet-based software mean that leakage, lines of flight and their subsequent mutations and transformations are immanent (Bittner et al., 2013).

While risks associated with the leakage of data and the potential for lost confidentiality and other effects are not isolated to digital methodologies (Hay, 2016), we argue that this is an area in which researchers need to take particular care in terms of the techniques and technologies they employ and the procedures that underpin them. The trajectory and speed with which the impacts of digital disruption diffuse is a key rationale for developing more critical understandings of the potential issues associated with incorporating digital technologies into research methodologies. The theoretical framework outlined above and our focus on leakage as lines of flight draws attention not only to the causes and immediate consequences of these problems but also to the wider affects and effects in the lives of participants, researchers and the social groups and institutions they are situated in. This approach reinforces the complexity of the research process, and interpenetration of institutions, research procedures, and ethical regulations. While it is not possible to discuss all issues in depth, there is a critical need to consider the relationships between different factors, the implications of adverse events, and responses at different scales.

We begin by reviewing the current literature on digital research methods and their growing use amongst geographers before outlining the case example of data leakage and its wider ramifications. We focus in particular on three issues that are salient for researchers considering digital methodologies and their concomitant risks: the ethical implications of procedural disruption, institutional responses within the neoliberal university, and researcher wellbeing. This paper is not a critique of research ethics *per se*, but rather seeks to validate the importance of principle-driven research and recognise the questions, issues, and responses that can arise in radically different digital research contexts. We conclude by advocating for researchers to continue to push boundaries with digital research but suggest that this needs to be undertaken in an informed way that takes account of the immanent potential for digital disruption.

## 2. Digital research methods

The use of online research spaces and digital technologies for data collection is becoming an increasingly important part of the methodological palimpsest in geography. In tandem with the growth and diversification of internet technologies and users, the scope, use and potential of internet mediated research is vast (Hewson, 2014). There is, accordingly, a growing body of literature concerning online methodologies and internet-mediated research that addresses: new techniques and approaches that are possible in digital worlds; perceived advantages, opportunities and risks associated with these technologies; and ethical issues associated with online research.

Digital technologies are now commonly employed by many researchers, but the use of terms such as 'digital' and 'online' can be slippery. The use of cameras, videorecorders, and Geographic Information System (GIS) trackers for example are considered digital methodologies. Children's geographies is one arena in which the uptake of digital technologies has been advantageous for enhancing understandings of children's use of space (Ergler et al., 2016). For example, Pooley et al. (2010) used cameras, GPS tracking technologies and text messaging services embedded in a mobile phone provided to each participant to explore the complexity of school journeys. These approaches can be distinguished from another cluster of methodologies, described as 'internet-mediated research' (Hewson, 2014), which are more closely aligned with online spaces. Markham (2008: 455) suggests that the internet is 'a social phenomenon, a tool, and also a field-site for qualitative research.' In other words, the internet can not only be identified as a source of data itself, but it can also be a tool and medium for the collection of new data (Collins, 2009; Marlowe et al., 2016). As a source, it can facilitate observation and analysis of existing webpages as well as online phenomena such as blogs, social networks such as Facebook or Twitter, and videos on YouTube (e.g., Olive, 2013; Hookway, 2008; De Jong, 2015). When the internet is used as a tool to collect new data for a specific study, focus groups, interviews, surveys, ethnography and diaries can be conducted in online spaces through the internet (e.g., Hooley et al., 2012; Hughes, 2012; Jones and Woolley, 2015; Madge and O'Connor, 2002; Williams, 2007). It is these more 'engaged' spaces of field research that hold potential for leakage. Indeed, it is the process of conducting internet mediated research, whereby the internet as an online space is central to the implementation of research methods, which provides the focus for our paper.

Online research promises new possibilities for accessing participants, for eliciting meaning of place, and for exploring the articulation of online and offline experience in everyday life. Lee et al. (2012) see advantages of online methods as including the ability to access a wider range of participants, the versatility of online spaces, opportunities for innovative data collection, time efficiency, and cost-effectiveness. Online methods can also offer opportunities to do research on controversial and stigmatised topics, with hidden and marginalised populations (see for example Barratt and Maddox, 2016). Further, Hewson (2014) additionally identifies the advantages of enhanced disclosure of information and improved data quality due to the ability to implement automated checks (for example, in web-based surveys). However, in the words of Lee et al. (2012: 5) 'new methods throw up unexpected challenges and opportunities, and place old problems in a new light.' Suggested risks associated with online research speak to our earlier themes of containment, relations, boundaries, and leakage. Hewson (2014), for instance, identifies concerns about data quality due to reduced levels of control and ability to monitor participants while they are completing a questionnaire, or participating in the interview or focus group. Sample bias due to the restricted nature of internet user populations has also long been a concern for online researchers (Hewson, 2014). However, it could be argued that more people have access to more technology in many different places, and thus such biases could be contained. Further, the ability of researchers to assess and contain potential harm to participants is more limited than in a face-to-face setting, thus posing another risk of online research (Eynon et al., 2008). The risks of undertaking research online are also sometimes linked to the newness of technology and limited number of previous studies which can be used to inform the development and implementation of methods. Ameliorative strategies, also employed in offline research, have been developed. Strategies include building a strong rapport with participants, informing participants that they can easily end their involvement at any time, and developing a robust

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