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At the interstices of ethics, the digital and research in higher education

Amanda Taylor-Beswick (Social Work, Queen's University Belfast) and Dina Zoe Belluigi (Higher Education Studies, Queen's University Belfast)

What members of research ethics committees learnt about themselves, their committees and their institutions from the 'pivot' online during the pandemic should be of interest to scholars of, and practitioners within, education systems. State restrictions led to sudden increases in digital technologies for various aspects of research practice, including field work, data processing, and administration. Digital tools were introduced not only into university systems, but also the lives of novice and experience researchers, at unprecedented speed and scale. Across the world, these were largely commissioned without the involvement of expert research communities ([Williamson, 2021](#); [Ndzinisa & Dlamini, 2022](#)) and without enablement for such communities to interrogate the wide-reaching implications of utilising products designed for commercial purposes.

While 'big tech' came under scrutiny for diluting information technology laws and disregarding data breaches; many within the HE ecology seemed unaware or unresponsive to ethical tensions - from those supervising research projects through to those in IT support and responsible for intellectual, data and privacy policies and structures. Attention (and scholarship) was understandably focussed on academic development to build capacity for ICTs in education. Scholars raised concerns about the lack of critical digital literacy across the global university community, to which we contributed (see for instance, [Goldkind et al., 2020](#)). Questions about academic practice and digital technologies emerged at ethical, social and digital intersections, including data mining, digital discrimination(s), and digital divide(s).

However, as peer reviewers for journals, networks and ethics committees, we observed that these concerns were almost absent in discourses about *research*. Conversations with scholars across institutional and international contexts echoed our observations of the lack of capacity, resolve and criticality within HE to navigate unintended consequences of the digital for research participants. They too expressed concerns about the complexities involved for researchers and those given the responsibility to assure research ethics (through peer review and supervision). While our own attempts at securing funding for such critical study are as yet frustrated, we maintain the importance of such considerations because of research ethics committees' *power* and *responsibility* to protect the rights, safety, dignity and well-being of research participants (including researchers), the academic integrity of research, and professional and reputational risk to the institution.

Ethical review is an established area of practice written about methodologically within the disciplines. Despite this, and the many varied and pressing critiques of the shortcomings of

institutionalised ethics review ([Brown et al 2020](#); [Datta 2018](#); [McAreavey & Muir 2011](#); [Kalervo et al 2021](#); [Schneider, 2020](#)), it remains largely underexplored as a researched subject in Higher Education Studies. Yet, as the [Journal of Academic Ethics](#) explores, peer review processes are fascinating to study. They are shaped by constructions of the universal, the contextual and situational. Their practice reflects individual and collective capacity; methodological traditions and disciplinary standards; institutional norms, policies and procedures; and national or regional regulations. The approaches to quality assurance, of such committees, may be underpinned by various models, including compliance, policing, promotion, development, enhancement or transformation. Committees may differ in how bounded and influential they are, affecting how they feedback/forward to the many other stakeholders their work abuts - including students, researchers, educators of research methods programmes, academic developers and institutional governance. An urgent issue with long term impacts is *how agile and supported are such committees to respond to the threats and possibilities of our increasing complex virtual and technological world?*

How can collectives, such as BERA, contribute? Provocations, such as this feature article, and timely publications (such as in [Digital Culture & Education](#)), can be catalytic. They afford us the pause to ask questions, such as those we have asked ourselves, our fellow committee members and our institution:

1. What enabled/ constrained ethical digital research practice within HE institutions during the pandemic's pivot online?
2. How did those serving on research ethics committees observe, experience and respond to digital shifts in research during the acute pandemic period and thereafter?
3. What have individual members, their committees and institutions learnt about research ethics practices from this period; and what learning might they take forward or leave behind?

The future ethical landscape of the increasingly digital university will soon be stewarded by you, our current ECRs, who have the potential to become a critical mass of scholar-practitioners to better inform ethical academic practice. The assessment of the digital research environment requires even more rigour than our considerations of the physical research environment, particularly around participant and information safety. These resources are useful for such processes:

- Brand, J. & Sander, I. (2020). Critical data literacy tools for advancing data justice: A guidebook. Data Justice Lab. <https://datajustice.files.wordpress.com/2020/06/djl-data-literacy-guidebook.pdf>
- Methods Lab - <http://www.methodslab.org/resources/>
- The Association of Internet Researchers Ethics Working Committee - <http://aoir.org/ethics/>
- The DETA worksheet - <https://dataschool.nl/deda/worksheet/?lang=en>

Be vigilant about the potential harms when researchers (and reviewers) are not tuned into online platform harms, such as data mining, profiling and scraping. Such foci for the scholarship of research ethics, and what (in)forms the support, development and assessment of its quality in practice, is of direct public interest, as is the continued contentious terrain of data protection and privacy.

Biographies

Dr Amanda Taylor-Beswick and Dr Dina Zoe Belluigi are academic colleagues in the School of Social Science, Education and Social Work at Queen's University Belfast who are committed to the critical study of policy and practice in higher education, to inform praxes and learning.

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