Common values, controversial facts: enacting dialogical ethics

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I have been invited to speak on Research Ethics today. The meeting that has brought us to this beautiful Mediterranean island of Sardinia is 'the values in qualitative research' and research ethics is a domain elaborated on the respect of values. The question I want to pose is quite simple to enunciate although not so simple to put into practice: which values should we respect? And how do we establish these values?

As all of you know, research ethics is a domain focused on the responsibility that social scientist have to assume in their research practice. It involves many different responsibilities: with society at large, with your own discipline, with the students you teach and, of course, with the people that take part in your research. My discussion today will be focused on this last dimension: the responsibility that social scientists have with their research subjects. Let me quote a statement of the Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association just to illustrate this issue:

> Anthropological researchers must do everything in their power to ensure that their research does not harm the safety, dignity, or privacy of the people with whom they work, conduct research, or perform other professional activities

> American Anthropological Association (1998)

We give for granted a set of common values that we should respect in our research: privacy, dignity, safety... From this starting point research ethics is formulated as a search for ways to respect these values. I will pose a first argument to show that values are not so shared and so common if we consider our research subjects opinions. When we discuss practical issues, facts, then what we assumed to be common values turn to be quite controversial –and not so common-.

The second argument I will elaborate is a consequence of the first. I will propose that the main objective of research ethics should be to search for the right questions. I will come back to this at the end of my talk.

For elaborating my discussion I will draw on my fieldwork researching a particular technology of Internet, blogs, and the practices around it. I will particularly discuss part of my methodological decisions and the ethical consequences of them.

But before going into the point I want to make a clarification. I have been thinking in what I could offer to you considering that my discipline of reference is anthropology and most of you work in different fields such as psychology and education, for instance. So, I have assumed that this difference could be a fertile ground for establishing an interdisciplinary debate. Of course, different disciplines, methodologies and techniques pose social scientists

with different ethical dilemmas, but this different ways of articulating the ethical responsibility may be a rich ground for discussing what sometimes is taken for granted. Any methodological decision is an ethical decision (Markham, 2006), so a strategy to make explicit many of these assumptions that embedded particular ethical decisions is to dialogue with other disciplines, approaches and methodologies. So I hope that the ethical dilemmas of and ethnographer could provoke you and serve you for questioning the consequences of your epistemic practices in relation to your research subjects.

Fieldwork among intensive bloggers
So let me introduce a brief description of my fieldwork, describing the people I have been researching and the way I articulated my presence in the field and my relation with the bloggers I have been trying to understand. It will help me to contextualize and describe the ethical problems that I faced and the argument I want to pose at the end in favour of a dialogical ethics.

For 18 months I have been doing fieldwork among bloggers in Spain. The people I have been researching and the blogs they elaborate are in no way representative of most of the people blogging. On the contrary, they are quite exceptional. They are intensive bloggers, passionate bloggers.

Intensive in terms of the temporal organization of their blogging practice. They write everyday, telling about their life, their work, things that they are interested in, the latest news they have read... intensive and extensive practitioners of technology: they not only use blogs but other Internet technologies too. They watch videos on the Internet, they publish photos, share bookmarks, upload presentations, etc.

The bloggers I have been researching write about Internet and digital technologies very often, especially about how blogs can transform our societies. They are deeply reflexive, discussing their own blogging practice. And this reflexivity makes explicit the high expectations that they pose on the power of blogs for transforming different social institutions: science, education, politics and mass media, among others.

These expectations lead them to try to enrol other people in blogging, so some of them persuade their partners, friends and relatives for opening a blog. And they organize conferences, meetings, and workshops with the same objective: trying to enrol more people in blogging.

For 18 months I have been reading blogs everyday, watching videos from time to time and looking at the images they publish on the Internet. I have attended to meetings, both formal and informal. Sometimes I spent two or three days in a conference organized by bloggers and focus on blogs, in other occasions we just went out to have a drink.

The result of my fieldwork was a vast amount of data of very different nature. Attending to the format and the context in which it was produced there are at least three different categories: text, video and photos. And three different context in which it was produced: on the Internet, on face to face events and on interviews.

Let examine this three categories of data and the negotiation process to produce this data. Data from interviews requires a negotiation with the person involved. Data from the Internet and from face to face event does not require it. In face to face meetings, however, when you take a photo anybody will realize that you are there. When you collect a photo

from the Internet, a video or a text, however, nobody knows that you are doing that; even more, they have not the ability to prevent you from collecting this data.

This is one of the most striking issues that social scientist researching the Internet have highlighted since the nineties: all these social data published on the Internet that is so easy to access; for some scientist it was a dream come true. However, collecting all these data published on the Internet posed myself the questions of whether I was legitimate to do that, if their authors could be upset or if I should advise them... These are the same ethical questions that any other social scientists face in their research.

Codes and conventions
When social scientists researching the Internet have tried to answer to these questions drawing on the ethical codes and guidelines of their disciplines they have found many difficulties. The conventional ethical codes provide no orientation for the ethical problems pose by the Internet.

So for the last ten years, there has been an intense debate and a growing literature in the field of Internet Research Ethics that has led to the elaboration of specific codes and guidelines for Internet Research (Buchanan & Hess, 2008). What I find interesting of this debate is that many concepts, assumptions and conventions of general research ethics have been questioned in it. Let me say it in a different way. Discussing the ethical problems that the Internet poses to researchers we can reflect on what does it mean research ethics in general.

Ethical dilemmas posed by Internet Research
I want to describe two examples of the ethical dilemmas that social scientists may find when researching the Internet. The first one is a problem that Elisenda Ardévol faced when she was doing fieldwork on one of these sites for looking for partner on the Internet. You know how they work. You open an account and elaborate your profile. Publish a few photos, describe you interests and what you are looking for and... you just have to engaged till you find your perfect match.

Once you login in this site you have access to other people profiles, descriptions and photos; so she started to collect data that she later used in a presentation in a small workshop with anthropologists; and it was after this workshop that some ethical issues raised, and then she started to think that perhaps she was not legitimized to use the images in which it was possible to recognize people.

Now, another different example from my first fieldwork. It was seven years ago, when I started my fieldwork researching a community of people around a news site devoted to technology news. It was a large site, with a few thousand participants, so it was really difficult, even impossible, to ask everybody for consent (Estalella, 2005). Although I had the consent from the administrators of the site, I felt the need of being visible in the site, making people aware of my presence as a researcher. So I opened a kind of blog that the site offered, in order to make me visible in the site.

These are only two examples of the many ethical questions pose to social scientists when researching the Internet.

The first one has to do with the special characteristics of images as a kind of registry. While using text data is easily to anonymize people, it is almost impossible to do the same when

using images. So images pose particular sharp ethical issues. The explosion of the use of images on the Internet raises the need for an urgent reflection on this issue. The second example raises the problem of making people be aware of the presence of the researcher, something essential if we want to avoid a cover research, and the issue of obtaining consent from research subjects.

In both cases, there are a common characteristic: there is a large amount of data that is easily accessible for anybody, including the researcher: text, images, history of participation, etc. The question that this information poses us is under which conditions we could use it. Usually, a basis for deciding on that is to establish whether a piece of information or a space is public or private. I want to get into some details on this dichotomy.

Privacy/Public
The public/private dichotomy is a fundamental axis for taking ethical decisions on any research (Estalella & Ardévol, 2007). And this distinction is especially relevant for participant observation and ethnography, in which you establish close relations with your informants and have access to much information that could be compromising for them.

General ethical codes establish that if some data is public then you don't need to ask for consent, if it is private you have to ask for it. If something is publish, like a tv broadcast, an event on the street, a public discourse or a print newspaper, then you don't have to ask for consent. If something is private, like a letter, a diary, a phone conversation or a room, then you should ask for inform consent, explaining people about your research and asking for permission for collecting this information or accessing these spaces.

Well, there are exceptions in this rule depending on the type of registries that you do. The National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities of Norway, for instance, establish that if you are doing participant observation in a public space and you are using video recording or taking photos, then you should at least advise of your presence (NESH, 2001). So, once again, the type of registry is important.

The public/private dichotomy is then a key axis to establish if you can freely collect information or you need to ask for inform consent to the people involved. Very often, if you don't ask for consent you can not access to the information. If you are not given consent it will be impossible for you to access to a house, a phone conversation, a private letter or a diary. Having said that, it is not odd that debates on Internet research ethics have been focused around this distinction, trying to decide whether a forum, a blog or any technology produce public or private data.

The private/public debate
When we translate this dual way of thinking in terms of the public and private to the Internet, the situation gets complicated. It is not clear what is public and what is private. Think in a particular forum, chat or blog. Are they public or private? This is the first questions researchers faced on the Internet.

So, to social scientist, the situation can be characterized as follows. There is an enormous amount of data freely accessible that, however, is not clear under which conditions it could be used.

Last year we had a seminar in my university with Malcolm Collier, a visual anthropologist who works on the University of Texas. He described in the seminar part of the work of his

father, John Collier, a visual anthropologist who did fieldwork among the Navajos in New Mexico. He father took photos of the Navajos and showed them to comment on it. It was a hard work. Now, think on the Internet. You can go to sites such as Flickr to find millions of photos that has been commented. The situation that social researchers find on the Internet is quite singular an enormous amount of data whose use is controversial.

When you ask some people in a forum or a newsgroup freely accessible (without password), for instance, if they feel comfortable with researches using the information they publish, many of them deny the right of researchers to use this information (Bakardjieva & Feenberg, 2001).

They have some expectations of privacy, no matter that the forum is freely accessible (Cavanagh, 1999). Accesibility, then, doesn't mean for many people lack of privacy, publicness. Being so controversial, some researchers have started to invent new concepts like semi-public (and semi-private) or privacy in public (Nissembaum, 1998). Even more, some of them has proposed to look for different concepts to articulate our ethical decisions.

More than the public/private dualism
Taking into account all this problems, some researchers have started to think in different terms. An example. Maria Bakardjieva (Univesity of Calgary) and Andrew Feenberg (San Diego State University) have proposed two concepts as an alternative decision framework to the dichotomy between private and public. One is objectification and the other one is alienation (2001). The first refers to how people construct their identity on the Internet, they objectify their identity in digital objects: text, images, videos, etc. The other refers to the appropriation of these digital objects for purposes never intended by their authors. For instance, for research purposes. Instead of thinking in terms of public and private, we can think in terms of alienation. Was in peoples' mind that this information could be used for research purposes? So their proposal look for new concepts (alienation and objectification) instead of privacy, and so they can pose new questions from this new concepts.

Enacting values
So it is easy to summarize this debate around privacy: on the Internet, it is difficult to decide whether something is public or private. Most of us agree on the values that should be respected. Few researchers would question that privacy, confidentiality or anonymity must be respected. However, when we have to decide if a particular space, an object or a practice are private or public, if they are anonymous or confidential, then agreement is difficult to reach and things get controversial.

This debate on privacy is of critical importance because it tells us that while we agree on values, we disagree about how values are put into practice. So, when we move from the discursive domain to the practicalities of values, we find that values in practice are quite controversial. I want to delve into this idea of values in practice because most of the debates on research ethics are not about values in abstract but about values in practice, about facts that have to be considered private, public, confidential and so on. A large part of our discussions are about enacting values in practice. But, what does it mean enacting values? I draw on the concept of enactment proposed by philosopher Anne Marie Mol (2002).

If you are surrounded by people in a meeting, and you want to maintain the privacy of what you say, then you whisper to your listener; if you don't want to be seen when you are

in your office, then you close the door. All this are instances in which privacy is enacted in practice; you do something in order to perform a certain value. In other circumstances privacy is something that is taken for granted. When you are walking with a friend on the street, you expect that nobody will joint you because he is very interested in your conversation; however, if you are presenting a book in a library, then it will be acceptable that somebody passing around gets interested and stay to listen to your talk. In all this cases, a certain value is put into practice, enacted. What I am proposing, then, is to move the debate from an axiological domain focused on values to an epistemological domain centred on values in practice, on facts.

Privacy, authorship

So, what about bloggers' privacy? You could ask. If we pay attention to many of their practices, we could be tempted to say that they are not worried about privacy, but this is not accurate.

Many of the bloggers that I have been following has spent more than five years blogging, in a daily basis, or at least a few times per week. No matter if their blogs are not personal, like for instance all those who write on technology; at the end, there is a huge amount of personal data in them. Photos of their home and their family, videos of them, information about what they do and what they are interested in, the book they are reading or the music they like...

But publishing all this information doesn't mean that they don't care about privacy. Let me show an example of how one of my correspondents in the field, one of my main informants, cares about privacy. She is a young woman working as assistant in a university in Madrid. She writes very often in her blog about education and technology. One day, she realized that her blog was configured to publish the precise time in which she published her articles. So she was worried that her work colleagues could assume that instead of working she was wasting time writing the blog in the working hours. She decided to remove the temporal data of the articles.

She was not worried about all the things that you can know about her from the blog, but about a very precise data, the time that appear in every article. The thing to protect, for her, was not what she wrote about herself, but the hour that she wrote it!

Other values

So this is the point I want to argue. It is not that she is not worried about privacy, but she understands privacy and enacts it in practice in a different way to many other people who, for instance, don't want photos of them published on the Internet.

Let me a digression, privacy is a topic widely debated nowadays; this debate tends to focus on the progressive erosion of privacy, but the great transformation is not that we are losing our privacy, but we are understanding and practicing it in completely new ways.

But privacy is not a topic that bloggers mention and debate very often. I have discussed it because it is important for us, as researchers. Instead of privacy, there is a different and much discussed value among the bloggers I have been studding, it is authorship. During my fieldwork, there were some intense debates that took place when a mass media took some information from a blog and elaborated a piece of news based on that information without referencing the source.

Among bloggers, authorship is enacted by hyperlinking. If you comment some news in your blog that you have read in other blog, then you should link to it, giving credit to the source. I say to the source in which you have read it, not the original source. This is important.

So, regarding privacy, bloggers understand and enact it in certain ways that are different to how other people enact it; even more, privacy and anonymity are not what worry them the most, it is, on the contrary, authorship.

I want to come back to my fieldwork for discussing a particular methodological strategy that I deployed on it: my field blog. By describing this strategy I want to highlight how I articulated my ethical responsibility in my research so that I can pose my last argument in favour of a dialogical ethics.

Field blog
I blogged for a large part of the 18 months of my fieldwork. Blogging meant reading blogs in the morning, for one or two hours, writing my own blog referring to what I have been reading, as many bloggers do, watching sometimes videos published by the bloggers and following the links they published.

Drawing on my previous experience researching this news site that I have described, I decided to open the blog. This decision had three different objectives that I have fulfilled at large. The field blog has let me to establish rapport with my informants. Blogging as them, exposing myself the way they do, I gained their confidence and established a close relation with them in part due to my blog. Blogging myself I have experienced what it means being a blogger, an intensive blogger. Engaging in blogging has been, moreover, a way to reflexively interrogate the technology, or even, let the technology to interrogate me. Finally, the blog has allowed me to make bloggers be aware of my presence as researcher. In my blog I explain that I was doing a research.

So although digital technologies pose us with particular ethical dilemmas, they offer us the opportunity to articulate our ethical responsibility and decisions in new ways. In my case, by engaging in blogging during my fieldwork.

Dialogical ethics
Thanks to the blog I became during my fieldwork very visible among some bloggers, so I avoid making a cover research. But being visible has involved new and unexpected ethical problems. In my everyday blogging routine I linked very often to the blogs I was researching. So, while I tried to respect authorship, this practice of giving credit to the bloggers resulted in exposing my informants. If you search for my name on Google, you will find my field blog. From it you can follow the links to the blogs I have been researching.

By participating in blogging I am traceable on the Internet, and being traceable I expose my informants and make very difficult to protect their anonymity. This is something I have been working with Anne Beaulieu, a researcher at the Virtual Knowledge Studio located at Amsterdam. We have finishing a paper on this topic (Beaulieu & Estalella, n/d). The point I want to make is that by blogging myself, by engaging with technology in my fieldwork, I chose between the anonymity, as I could understand and practice it, and authorship, as bloggers understand and practice it. My decision could be debated because I expose my

informants identity, but they are not worried about anonymity, on the contrary, what worries them most is authorship, being as visible as possible.

The second consequence of my field blog that I want to refer is the value of my own experience. While the ethical objective was to make bloggers aware of my presence; and it was fulfil, it has been my everyday experience by blogging what has allowed me to understand to a large extend the value of authorship and the meaning of privacy and anonymity for bloggers. Even more, by blogging myself I made me reachable, I expose myself in the same way that bloggers expose themselves. I could be questioned in the natural way that bloggers do it, just by commenting on my blog or by linking me from their blogs.

Conclusion

For concluding; I have tried to describe some of the ethical dilemmas that I faced during my fieldwork and how I tried to articulate my ethical responsibility from the beginning by engaging with the same technology I was researching, by actively participating in the collective I tried to understand.

Blogging myself has meant being open to the others, offering them ways to question me and trying to establish symmetrical relations. It was a strategy to articulate my ethical responsibility in the field, however, I have had to face new and unexpected ethical dilemmas due to my blogging practice. Ethical dilemmas that have shown me that we can not assume in advanced which are the relevant values that we will deal with in our research. By engaging with technology I have tried to pose an argument in favour of a dialogical ethics whose main objective is to unveil others values.

While my argument has been elaborated drawing on the empirical data produced through an ethnography, the essential element of my argument can be extended to other disciplines, methodologies and techniques. Our challenge is to understand other's values and to enact them in our research practices. Doing ethnography you can articulate this in certain ways, in other disciplines and methodologies there are chances to do it in a different way.

If we assume this, then our point of departure will be quite uncertain. To a large extent this makes impossible the way IRB work, as they decide in advanced which values should be protected and how the researcher should do it. However, this uncertainty that is full of risks, is the most honest position we could adopt with respect to our research subjects, in my opinion. This uncertainty is the starting point for not making a decision for them.

So this is my conclusion, the last argument I want to pose. Our ethical responsibility should not be articulated as a search for the right answer to the questions that we pose a priori, questions like: how to protect privacy? or how to preserve anonymity? Research ethics should be, on the contrary, a practice in search for the right questions; a practice in search for the questions that touch on the values of the people that we research. And these values are not necessarily the same that we imagine, even more, this values are not necessarily enact in the same way that we do. This is our responsibility with the people who help us to understand the world.

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