SOAS
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Conducting Research Despite Travel Restrictions

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Introduction

At the time of writing, May 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted all aspects of life around the world, and academic research is no exception. It is also widely predicted that even after the present pandemic calms down, international travel restrictions are likely to remain in place in some shape or form for the foreseeable future. Researchers are seeking ways to move their projects forward despite the unprecedented challenges of lockdowns and social distancing measures. This brief guide, adapted from the module Technology-Enhanced Research, aims to provide researchers at SOAS with some practical pointers in navigating such challenges.

General points

Before we consider different scenarios of fieldwork in this document, here are a couple of general notes to bear in mind.

• If your research involves human participants or personal data, it requires an ethical approval by the School, no matter whether it takes place in physical settings or is conducted entirely remotely through digital means. Full information on the policy and procedures can be found here.

• New digital tools come and go, so choosing one that suits your project best is a complex process. Your first port of call is your institution as they will help you in that process and offer recommendations.

• We acknowledge that not all research projects can be 'moved' online. In many cases, researchers may feel that being in the same physical space with participants is an irreplaceable part of their projects. However, both face-to-face interaction and virtual interaction have their relative strengths and weak-nesses, and we need to make the best of what is available in a given situation.

Interviews and focus groups

If you were initially planning to conduct interviews and focus group discussions as part of your fieldwork, one immediate

alternative would be to arrange video chats instead. The School recommends Microsoft Teams, which is part of the Microsoft Office 365 ProPlus suite downloadable from the [Software Download Centre](#) on the student intranet.

Consent

Online interviews and focus groups make it logistically easier for the researcher to save records of conversations, but the same robust ethical principles must apply. Make sure you obtain informed consent for each interview, and if you wish to record it, make sure every party to it is aware of, and agrees to that, in advance.

Ways of communication

If your participants are in a region where bandwidth is likely to be an issue, or if you are going to work with people across different time zones, consider asynchronous ways of communication. For example, you can
(i) set up a discussion board in Microsoft Teams
(ii) ask participants to fill out a questionnaire, which you can create using your SOAS account—not your personal account—for Microsoft Forms or Google Forms
(iii) or ask them to keep a diary or a photo album for a limited duration of time about activities or experiences that you are researching and send it to you.

Data compliance

Any personal data you collect needs to be stored in a secure and legally compliant manner. You are advised to store yours on SOAS OneDrive, a cloud storage space provided by the School.
        If you find yourself having to use any applications other than the ones that are institutionally endorsed, as out-lined above, please make sure that you discuss in full detail the rationale, potential risks, and mitigation measures in your ethical review and fieldwork application.

Social media research

If your plan was to observe people's languages, behaviours, and interactions in certain natural settings, you are encouraged to think of an online space where similarly relevant interactions may take place. Various social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, have been receiving much scholarly attention, especially over the last decade, to that end.

Planning for data collection

Here are a few questions that you may wish to ask yourself when choosing a method and tool for collecting data from social media.

- How much data do you need?
- How far does it have to go back? Older posts are trickier to collect.
- Is the data you need accessible publicly (although that does not mean that it is up for grabs) or does it sit behind protected accounts?
- Does the platform of your interest provide APIs (application programming interfaces) for developers and end-users to access data? Most commercial platforms restrict such access, but in some cases, options are available for research purposes. Here is what Twitter offers, for example.
- Are you proficient in computer languages such as R or Python? If not, can you afford to undertake training or hire a research assistant with the necessary technical skillset?
- Do you have a budget that will enable you to purchase off-the-shelf software or premium data access?

Collecting data using NCapture

If this is your first time considering extracting data from social media, and you do not have coding skills, one relatively simple option at your disposal is to use NCapture. It is a web browser extension that comes as part of NVivo, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) package that the School provides licences for. You can get a copy from the

[Software Download Centre](#) for your home use. NCapture will help you import an ample amount of latest posts from Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube into your NVivo project file. (The exact quantity of the imported data will depend on what Twitter's standard API allows for a given query.) Here are the relevant sections of the NVivo 12 manual for [Windows](#) users and [Mac](#) users.

Collecting data using NodeXL

If your interest is specifically in network analysis and visualisation, another popular option with a low threshold for use is NodeXL, which is a Microsoft Excel add-in developed by the [Social Media Research Foundation](#), USA.

Fieldnotes

Despite these technical possibilities, however, extracting a large set of posts is not a prerequisite for social media research. You can instead take an ethnographic approach and maintain fieldnotes, for example.

Ethical considerations for internet research

One important point to highlight is, as also briefly mentioned above, that someone posting something on social media in 'public mode' is not the same as something being in public domain and hence available for research. This is an area where there is no hard-and-fast consensus and much depends on the context, but general professional principles are, according to the [latest ethics guidelines published by the Association of Internet Researchers (2019)](#):

• Respect the platform's terms and conditions, which will set the parameters of what is accessible for research.

• Respect other users' reasonable expectation of privacy. Especially if the material that you wish to collect is located behind login pages, members-only groups, and protected accounts (visible to selected audiences), consider those as private spaces and apply the same ethical principles and

etiquette that you would apply when conducting your research in someone's business premises or intimate gatherings. In other words, you will have to identify yourself as a researcher and obtain informed consent from not only the administrator but also everyone else in that space.

• Having said that, if your project is based on 'big data', it is unrealistic to obtain consent from everyone. You will then need to make a strong case in your institutional ethical review, and, assuming approval is granted, anonymise data as soon as it is collected so that you will only report at an aggregate level. If you are going to single out any particular posts in your writing, you need at least to seek permission from the authors of those posts.

Archives and databases
You can also consider 'unobtrusive methods' and make use of archives, documents, artefacts, and existing datasets. New knowledge often comes from casting a fresh perspective on existing material, such as systematic reviews and meta-analyses.

In light of the pandemic and lockdowns, many libraries, museums, and galleries around the world have made their digital collections available to a broader public. Consult our subject and regional librarians and seek their help in locating relevant resources for your research.

Further support
The challenging circumstances of the pandemic have encouraged us to explore newer ways of conducting research. Due to space constraints, this guide covers only a few selected fieldwork scenarios, but further support is available from the Research Office and other teams at SOAS.

www.soas.ac.uk/researchoffice
www.soas.ac.uk/doctoralschool