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Navigating Digital Ethics for Rural Research:

Guidelines and recommendations for researchers and administrators of social media groups



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Contents

Introduction	2
How these guidelines came to be	3
How to use this guide	3
Guidelines for Researchers engaging with Facebook Groups:	
Understanding typical group characteristics	4
Rural community Facebook groups	4
Understanding different purposes and participation	5
Administrator policies and practices	5
Establishing contact	6
Avoiding being extractive	6
Iterative informed consent	7
Being aware of group dynamics	7
Inclusivity and language	8
Administrator data	8
When it's okay to say no thanks	9
Your Facebook profile	9
Your safety and wellbeing	10
Key Considerations for Facebook Group Administrators:	
Codes of Conduct	11
Administrator wellbeing	11
Managing bots and false accounts	12
Who is this researcher? Finding fair and trustworthy researchers	12
Developing the researcher relationship – Collaborating with researchers	14
Questions to ask (and what to do if something goes wrong)	14
Resources	15
Action points for researchers	16
Reflection points for Facebook administrators	17
Further reading	18
About this document	19
Acknowledgements	19

Introduction

Social media creates new spaces for connecting people digitally and provides a forum for the exchange of information and discussion. Online spaces such as Facebook groups (FGs) have become part of the fabric of social interaction in many rural areas, with both residents and others living away from the community maintaining a connection in the virtual space. Community FGs are routinely used to share place-based information about resources, events or issues, and to discuss topics of shared interest. In research, these groups allow researchers to connect directly with people who have an interest in what happens within specific communities and offer rich opportunities for participants to likewise engage with research. We can reflect on how FGs in rural communities have the potential to enhance and/or complement existing approaches by making research with dispersed communities more accessible and affordable, while considering challenges around confidentiality and digital inclusion given the characteristics and size of the population¹.

Social media has developed at pace during the last decade, and digital ethics is a shifting methods sub-field that poses challenges to social sciences and humanities researchers. Apart from platforms' changing terms and conditions, research with and on social media groups has specific ethical challenges (e.g. around anonymity, confidentiality, and data access) that require tailored consideration.

In particular, when approaching netnography and similar methods with social media groups, dialogic approaches which aim to engage, respect and protect participants are critical². There is consensus on the need to agree the access conditions with the group administrator as a first step, but there is no guidance on good practice on developing these conditions.

To create these guidelines, we have worked collaboratively across disciplines and with administrators of Facebook groups to explore what such process could look like: aspects to address, pros and cons of potential approaches, and potential challenges and solutions.

¹ Brady Robards et al., "Data Selves: Trust, Control and Self-Representation In Digital Society". *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research*, 2019. (October, 2019). <https://doi.org/10.5210/spir.v2019i0.10944>

² Alison Mayne, "Virtually ethical: Ethnographic challenges in researching textile crafters online" in *Digital Sociologies*, edited by Jessie Daniels, Karen Gregory and Tressie McMillan Cottom, pp.61-76, *Bristol: Policy Press*. 2017. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1t89cfr>

How these guidelines came to be

Taking a co-design approach, the research team designed and organised a participatory workshop, held in June 2023 at Birnam Arts Centre, Scotland. This invited administrators of Facebook Groups representing rural communities in different ways to discuss the ethical challenges of undertaking research with Facebook Groups and how to address them. The workshop was hybrid (with attendants in person and online), distributed over 2 days, and had the participation of 4 administrators from diverse Facebook Groups in rural communities.

During the workshop, various topics were collectively discussed, including the different types of groups and their resultant dynamics, aspects of privacy concerns, what information is shared, duration of engagement with the research and specific time demands of the administrator. Throughout the participatory workshop sessions, the research team built in time to debrief on the discussions held with administrators and start developing guidance for engagement. Participants were later consulted on the draft version of the guidelines to gather final input and ensure that the document captured fairly the ethical aspects discussed.

Preliminary and draft versions of the guidelines were presented at two academic gatherings with diverse audiences, sparking follow-on discussion and further reflection on the need for considered ethical care and process. In July 2023, it was presented at the Congress of the European Society of Rural Sociology (Rennes, France), in a dedicated working group on methodological advances; in September 2023, the guidelines were presented at the British Academy Early Career Research Network Showcase, held in (Stirling, Scotland) to an audience of early career researchers across the Humanities and Social Sciences. Feedback from both sessions has been taken into account in the elaboration of this final version of the document.

How to use this document

The Guidelines are divided into two sections - **For Researchers** indicated with orange headings and **For Facebook Group Administrators** indicated with blue headings.

Within each section, different topics begin with a summary collated from our workshop and desk-based research, followed by a bullet-point list of *Some Things to Consider*.

Whilst we've made every effort to simplify our learnings for each audience and present these into two distinct sections with colour coding in orange and blue to help navigate, both researchers and Facebook Group Administrators are encouraged to read each section. This may help heighten understanding for both sides and facilitate a better research experience.

Finally, the Guidelines end with a list of **Resources**. There is a summarised set of action or reflection points for researchers to consider spanning the whole of the research process, that could be useful as a checklist exercise between the researcher and Administrator. Finally, some further reading has been compiled by the authors to highlight their influences for this research and where to go next for more information.

These Guidelines are not intended to be the definite start and end point for researchers seeking ethical approval for their research with social media platforms. It is focused on establishing the relationship with administrators of social media groups, but it does not deal with every complex by using social media platforms, such as the challenges of managing anonymity and confidentiality. The resources listed in the Further Reading section at the end of this document might provide helpful information on these aspects. This guide is intended as a useful tool for both researchers and Facebook Group Administrators to understand their role, expectations of the research and who to go to when in doubt.

Guidelines for Researchers

Understanding typical group characteristics

Facebook Groups can fall into different categories. Apart from the content, they differ in formal characteristics enabled by the social media platform to accommodate different types of structures and goals. These differences might impact the privacy of a post and the interaction dynamics within the groups. Looking at the most current descriptors on the Facebook Help Centre pages is a good place to start. At the time of writing, options for groups included:

- Public groups: Anyone can see posts and comment - including people not on Facebook
- Private groups: Only existing members of the group can see posts and comment
- Hidden groups: Private groups that only members can find on Facebook
- Pages: Pages are different from groups and are usually used by formal organisations to connect with their audience. Although the participation dynamics might be quite similar to groups, their management and privacy settings and options are different

The first step is to properly identify the type of group and its formal characteristics: what type of interaction you can expect and what degree of privacy it offers to posts and members.

Some things to consider:

- What category is the group?
- What are Facebook's basic rules of this type of group?
- Might this type of group raise specific expectations regarding privacy or types of participation?
- Are there any specific Facebook rules regarding privacy or information sharing?

Rural community Facebook groups

In many rural places, Facebook groups have become part of the fabric of social interaction, with both residents and others living away from the community maintaining a connection in the virtual space. Community FGs are routinely used to share place-based information about resources, events or issues, and to discuss topics of shared interest.

In research, these groups allow researchers to connect directly with people who have an interest in what happens within specific communities and offer rich opportunities for participants to engage with research. These type of groups have the potential to enhance and/or complement existing approaches by making research with dispersed communities more accessible and affordable

However, given the characteristics and size of the population, specific challenges around confidentiality and digital inclusion need to be considered.

Some things to consider:

- Are you already known within the group? If so, how would your activity in the group affect your research in this place?
- How might your presence within the group affect the power dynamics (e.g. are you observing or using the group as a means to collect new data)

Understanding different purposes and participation

The creation and maintenance of a group might result from a variety of different motivations, from allowing people to stay in touch, to sharing resources and information of common interest, or reaching and creating an audience or customer base, to name a few examples.

The purpose of the group might have impacted the type of FG the group administrators chose to create. This will translate into the type of posts and participation the group engages in, for example information sharing, complaints, questions to the community or sharing memories.

Some things to consider:

- Can you describe what the driving force of the group is?
- What and who is the group intended for?
- How is that evidenced in how it is used?
- How does the purpose of the group match the purposes of your research?

Administrator policies and practices

Understanding the purpose, policies and practices of the group – both those which are stated and those which are not – is key to establishing positive, ethical collaborations. Group administrators play a key role in the dynamics of any Facebook Group. Their choice of settings for the group may determine who can see that the group exists and who can be invited to join. They may also choose to screen potential group members, a process which may be carried out using a structured set of rules or determined on a case-by-case basis according to the administrator's preference at the time.

Although the group rules may provide some guidance as to admission criteria (for example, stating you must be a resident of a specific island) it should be noted that the decision on who can access the group is ultimately at the discretion of the administrators. Administrator policies will be shaped by the type and purposes of each group, and by the positions taken by the individual administrators. It is not uncommon for administrators to act in an editorial role in terms of the content available in the group. At a basic level this can include removing spam posts or posts which do not adhere to the groups rules. However, an administrator also has the power to turn off comments on posts, delete posts, and pre-screen posts for any or all group members

before they are made public.

While some of the group information may indicate the level of editorialisation undertaken by administrators, groups are self-regulated in this regard. As such the administrators may choose to block or remove content which is not in line with their personal values or beliefs, or for other personal reasons (e.g. disputes with individuals), without being required to justify their actions.

Some things to consider:

- How might members of the group edit themselves and their content?
- Where there are multiple administrators, does this editorialisation vary from individual to individual or group to group?
- What impact might your presence have on these factors?

Establishing contact

Understanding the group might require spending some time getting acquainted with the group, by observing group activity for a short period (if access conditions allow - this may not be ethically appropriate or possible in private groups). Contact the group administrator(s) and tell them why you are interested in joining the group. It could be that you are exploring the possibility of carrying out research with the group if they agree - but in order to consider that, you would like to follow the group in advance to understand it better. Answer the administrators' questions honestly. Revisit the conditions of your participation later before collecting data in order to gain consent. With the proliferation of bots, it is important for a researcher aiming to collaborate with a FG to establish their online identity clearly, and be mindful of the privacy settings for their own Facebook profiles.

Some things to consider:

- Think about how to approach the administrators - what is the most professional or 'human'
- Be conscious of the time you are asking for people to consider your enquiry - many administrators are volunteers with many plates to spin
- False accounts and bots are becoming more sophisticated. Consider the impact this may have on your research and any procedures you can implement to minimise any risk
- Check the privacy settings of your own account regularly
- Identify any measures you can take to reduce misinformation spreading

Avoiding being extractive

Joining a group might potentially give the researcher access to information that could be susceptible to be seen as data but that might not be in the remit of the study (e.g. historic posts and comments, access to participant's profiles). Unless the study design included the collection of such data and consent has been gained for this, data collection should be limited. Having access to information and details that could be

susceptible to be considered data does not implicitly allow its collection. Researchers may also consider whether their study should provide feedback to the Facebook Group at various stages of the project and keep the members updated about the study. Mutual and continued respect between the two parties should be at the forefront of any research participation

Some things to consider:

- Have you clearly identified which data are you going to collect from posts and users (e.g. written posts, comments, links shared, media), and between which publication dates?
- Are you collecting any type of data from users profiles (e.g. names, contact details, but also other groups they might participate in)?
- Have you clearly informed the group admin and participants about the type of data you are aiming to collect and gained consent?
- Have you informed and gained consent about all the data types that you are collecting?

Iterative informed consent

The way in which Facebook and other social media platforms operate at the moment makes it very difficult - if not impossible - to ensure that a user will see a specific post. Groups are also live spaces, with new participants joining periodically. Particularly for studies that span over a period of time, users might read and forget. For all these reasons, it is important that informed consent is iterative and it is ensured the researcher reminds the group of their presence and data collection regularly. The characteristics and frequency of these reminders can be consulted and agreed with the group administrator. If considered appropriate, the group administrator may also choose to include a note informing about the ongoing collaboration with the researcher in the group information or code of conduct.

Some things to consider:

- Be aware that Facebook's own terms and conditions might include their own rules regarding consent for data collection. Check details at the Facebook Help Centre pages regularly

Being aware of group dynamics

The topic, purpose and history of the group might influence a specific type of dynamic within the group that is critical for the researcher to understand and acknowledge. The researcher's expectations as well as those of the administrator(s) and group members may not be met, and communication and transparency will be key to progressing with the research. In particular, toxic dynamics can derail a group, including your research project if it is not conducted appropriately. Unless this is an aspect of your research, you need to understand how this may operate in the group and how administrators manage it.

Being aware of the existence of a code of conduct is important in developing your

relationship with the group and might also have implications on your research (e.g. regarding frame of interactions).

Some things to consider:

- Does the group have a established code of conduct or ground rules?
- Could your participation in the group be seen as a stretch or contravening any of the rules?
- Do you need to adapt any of your planned strategies/activities to ensure compliance?

Inclusivity and language

Communication in groups is primarily based on written language along with a growing repertoire of visual symbols (e.g. emojis, stickers) and media (e.g. gifs, photos, videos). Visual symbols are increasingly described using ALT text for inclusivity.

It is usual for groups to share a common language or communicate primarily in a common language, although the level of language proficiency will vary among users (e.g. native speakers, fluency and literacy levels as well as the type of register or formality used for the topic discussed. In place-based groups, the communication language(s) used can be multiple (e.g. Gaelic, slang, local dialects and English).

Some things to consider:

- How will you show respect for / acknowledge the language used by participants in any interactions?
- How can you ensure that the information provided about the research uses clear language?
- Might you need to allow time for any necessary modifications including translations?

Administrator data

Facebook group admins have a wealth of data which may be very valuable both for your research and their own understanding of how the group operates. Collaborating on investigating this with the administrator may be a way of giving back to them for their time and knowledge.

Things to consider with the group administrator include:

- Geolocation data of membership – eg how many are in the locale of the rural area vs distant from it – and how far? Are these previous visitors, residents or those who feel another connection?
- Statistical analyses of comments numbers, timescales and types of reactions
- Frequency and intensity of posts and commenters in the group – those who provide different types of comments but rarely post, those who post frequently /

infrequently and the range of responses these generate

- Participation of inactive group members. Think about ‘lurkers’ and how these are still a valuable part of a community

When it’s okay to say no thanks

The role of researchers can be seen on occasions as positions/roles of respect or public interest which people might tend to trust without thinking through the implications. On occasions, and aiming to facilitate the collaboration and make the research easy, administrators might be offered access to third-party data without knowing (e.g. historic posts, screenshot of private messages, access to groups without informing participants). This is particularly relevant in the case of protected data. Although such access might sound a good opportunity, it is important that the researcher observes the data collection plan designed for their study, and if necessary, works with the group administrator or user on an alternative plan to gain access to data respecting the consent conditions as agreed/negotiated.

It is important that both researchers and administrators feel comfortable with the access agreed, so if there are doubts about any of the details, it is a good idea to review jointly the information and consent form provided to make sure the information provided is clear and clarify any point as appropriate. If there are any aspects that remain uncomfortable for any of the parts, it is totally fine to seek additional information (see the additional resources section for a selection of platforms that might be useful in those cases).

Some things to consider:

- Am I being offered access to protected data that I had not considered before?
- Am I being offered access to data without knowledge or consent from the users?
- Does the access agreed with the group align with the reviewed ethics plan?

Your Facebook profile

Interacting with Facebook groups normally requires you to have a Facebook profile. Currently, anyone with a Facebook account has access to the publicly available information on your profile. The level of information open to the public will be determined by the privacy settings you have enabled on your profile. For some admins, checking your profile before admitting you to the group or communicating further about your research might be a critical part of establishing your identity.

Given this, you may want to consider identifying yourself as a researcher and/or that you are conducting research with Facebook groups. However, you should be aware that this information will be available to a wide range of people.

Some people are known to have set up separate Facebook profiles specifically for work purposes, but it should be noted that this currently goes against the rules of the platform. It may also cause issues with interactions if this account does not actively post content, friends others, or interact in other ways.

When thinking about your profile, you may wish to consider wider areas such as:

- Does your institution have regulations about whether you can show your affiliation or not? Your institution's Research Office / Research & Knowledge Exchange can probably advise you on this matter
- Do you use the same name on Facebook as you do in your research career?
- What personal information is identifiable from your 'about' info? Check what can be seen from a public vs private profile setting
- Does your profile indicate a relationship to a particular place? This could be beneficial for engagement but you may not wish to share this information
- What impressions are formed from photographs visible from a public view, including past profile pictures? Do they show children in your family?
- What impression can be formed of you from the posts which can be seen by Facebook friends and general Facebook users? Consider how this might affect the ways administrators and potential participants engage with you, but also how your employers and funders might perceive your posts

Your safety and wellbeing

Keep your own safety and wellbeing at the forefront of your mind – do not dismiss this in your research and do make sure to add it as a factor in any risk assessment you complete.

- Maintain boundaries between your research participants and requests to be 'friends' – this will help to keep your own profile private and your relationships professional (this can always change after research is complete)
- Consider the times of day that you are "at work" on Facebook or other social media accounts for the purposes of your research. This also applies to your general availability on each platform
- Keep awareness that some Facebook groups can become toxic or may have toxic elements within them: even if this an area of interest in your research, you cannot be drawn into this as an actor
- Many participants use Facebook groups as places to disclose sensitive and sometimes distressing stories. Depending on your research topic, the likelihood of coming across this type of situations might be higher. Think through your roles and responsibilities carefully before undertaking research with Facebook groups with your supervisors / PI / mentor about what to do if something should happen and identify in advance contact line referrals if appropriate

Think about your safety and wellbeing during the whole research process and revisit and adapt your participation if appropriate to protect your wellbeing.

For Facebook Group Administrators

Codes of conduct

A Code of Conduct or set of FG ground rules were considered by participants to be a useful tool for navigating membership and participation of the researcher and managing potential difficulties in group relationships. These are usually displayed in the information sections of the group and sometimes members have to agree to them before joining the group.

Many examples can be found through a web search and on Facebook's own help pages – we are not providing a template here, but some factors to consider when crafting the rules.

- Setting expectations beyond 'being kind and respectful' are useful because it enables you to clarify group and administrator values about issues which could derail a group and cause issues in the community
- Areas which you may wish to cover include a clear stance on legal and moral issues such as hate speech, racism and prejudices around gender, sexual orientation, religion and xenophobia
- Marketing of products or services can be issue where it begins to dominate a FG – is this something which you will allow or not?
- There may be sensitive local issues particular to your area – are discussions welcome or are there still boundaries?
- What are key safeguarding areas you want in place to protect wellbeing for group members, the wider community, and yourself?
- Where FG members contravene ground rules, what are the next steps? It is also helpful to be transparent about administrator decisions on suspension and blocking

Administrator wellbeing

Being a FG Moderator / Administrator can be time consuming and emotionally draining – as in life, it is important to think about managing boundaries and looking after your own energies.

There are practical steps which can help, eg:

- Using 'housekeeping rules' like joining steps as a pinned post
- Making safeguarding behaviours clear in a pinned post
- Working on a clear code of conduct, returning to update it when needed.
- Making your values transparent clear in the 'about' section

And here are some emotional steps to consider:

- Having a small, trusted support community if you are a solo administrator (and making succession plans for who can help)
- Taking time away to think and decompress before posting responses

- Having good boundaries on time (how much and when) you spend - can these be published in the group?
- Reflecting on what you are in the group for – what your role is / isn't. This might also be useful to publish in the group.

Managing bots and false accounts

Unsurprisingly, FG administrators commented that a significant amount of their time is spent on identifying, denying and deleting automated bots and spam accounts. Accounts with lax security measures can also pose a risk to the group and information may be used or shared unknowingly. Given the prevalence of this growing problem, both researchers and FG administrators need to be aware of this issue and the potential for any data to be shared outwith the agreed confines of a particular FG.

Sometimes bots might be obvious, but they are increasingly more sophisticated and could take a while to identify as they tend to behave like humans. False accounts can include accounts impersonating someone else and software automated 'bot' accounts.

Many FG administrators deal with these on a regular basis, blocking them when spot-checking or when requests to join the group are made. It is important to be aware that Facebook/Meta on its own is not able to spot and stop all bots and false accounts. Most often, Facebook is able to identify an automated 'bot' account at the registration stage but a false account made by a human is more difficult.

Some things to consider:

- If you have time, check profile names, date of joining the platform and reverse image search the profile picture
- Check for very low follower / very high following numbers
- Be aware that some researchers may have a sparse online social media profile as part of contractual obligations - they should provide you with other means to establish they are a good actor - see below

Who is this researcher? Finding fair and trustworthy researchers

Being contacted out of the blue by someone asking for access to a group and/or information about it might be seen with suspicion. When administrators signed-up for the responsibility of administering a group, the idea that they might be approached by researchers may not have crossed their mind.

Researchers will usually introduce themselves and their research aims when contacting FB groups. It is standard practice now in most countries, including the UK, to provide detailed information in written form (usually called "information sheet" or "participants information") summarising aims of the research, information about funders and team, what type of collaboration is being asked of you, what data will be collected and how it will be managed, any other conditions of participating in the study, and contact details of the researcher responsible for the study (who might be or not the person who contacted you in the first place).

If it is developed within an academic institution, it should include as well the contact details of a third party in the institution (e.g. a supervisor in case of students' project), often the ethics committee, that you could contact if needed to confirm/check the legitimacy of the study.

Verifying the researchers' identity

In general researchers have a public profile within their institution website that might include a summary about their professional activity (e.g. research interests, experience, publications). They might provide the link to you as way to verify their identity, but if not, it is always possible to search for their name within the corresponding institutional page.

Many researchers, and particularly independent researchers, also have their own website, one separated from their institution, where they might provide not only institutional information but might offer as well a peek at their personal interests and activities carried out beyond their official job. (See for example the website of one of the members of our team - www.knitrospective.com)

Facebook is a social media platform that many researchers do not usually use in their jobs, so it might not be uncommon if a researchers' profile is new (created purposely for contacting you), or very old/outdated (unused for many years), private or with no many information available (when created and used for staying in contact with relatives), or feels very unrelated (perhaps in another language in the case of international researchers). However, most researchers have profiles in social media platforms focused on connecting academics and disseminating scientific work. In most cases, access to the basic information is available without need to signing up. Some of the more popular at the time of writing up this guide are Researchgate.com and Academia.edu.

Although most researchers are registered in googlescholar.com and ORCID.com (these provide a catalogue of publications), it is important to consider that not all researchers might have profiles. Newer researchers (e.g. PhD students) might not have a profile at all or their profile might not include any projects or publications.

In general researchers are dedicated people who would have put a lot of thought in the collaboration before contacting you and will be happy to respond any question. Just ask!

Some things to consider:

- Does the researcher have a web profile?
- Does the profile align with the information they have provided me?
- Have they provided means to verify their identity externally?
- Are they answering my questions in a clear and open way?
- What means of contact do I have?

Developing the researcher relationship - Collaborating with researchers

Both parties are interested in pursuing the research, so what happens next? At this stage, hopefully the administrator(s) and the researchers have agreed on the research outline, including any opportunities for co-production, and consent has been agreed and been reviewed by the ethics board at the appropriate research organisation. If applicable, the administrator(s) and researcher may agree to 'meet' virtually online or continue correspondence outside of the Facebook Group channel in order to go over the research process in more detail. Researchers and administrators can expect to be kept updated about the research, with agreed means of 'checking-in' and notified of any important relevant changes to the platform's terms and conditions, the research being undertaken and any pertinent changes within the FG. Checking-in can take many forms, including emails, direct messaging within the platform, video-call, telephone call or even in-person if appropriate. At no point should the FG administrator not know how to contact the researcher(s) and their Institute regarding the research.

Some things to consider:

- Agree with the researcher about the preferred means of communication and when you are likely to receive correspondence
- Agree to have regular 'check-ins' if you feel this is appropriate
- Have a clear research plan and end date agreed for the project

Questions to ask (and what to do if something goes wrong)

At the very beginning of the process, a researcher will give you information about their line manager/supervisor and department, with an overview of the project: for academic research, this may also include the Principal Investigator contact name and email, plus further contact details for the person responsible for the Ethics Panel at their university or research organisation. If you are concerned about the time demanded of you for the research, you can talk to the researcher about an appropriate solution; whether you want to reduce your time commitments, withdraw completely, or whether they can keep the data they've collected with you so far. Remember you always have the right to withdraw from research for any reason – you should never feel under pressure or an obligation to keep going.

Some things to consider:

- Ask researchers about where they are storing your data, how long for, and what happens to it when the project is over
- Can the researcher explain their expectations (of time, knowledge, or making connections) they might have of your participation?
- If something happens that feels wrong, you feel taken advantage of, or something occurs which you didn't consent to, you have a route for a formal complaint using the contact details mentioned at the beginning of this section.



Resources

Action points for Researchers



Understanding community Facebook groups

- I understand the 'type' of community group / Facebook page and have considered how this may impact expectations around privacy and how I will interact with members.
- I have taken the time to understand the values and motivations of the Facebook community/page, its purpose, and its use before engaging with the group for research.
- I have considered the interactions between the virtual and place-based spaces of communities I am working with, and how my research may affect their dynamics.
- I have considered how the Facebook group/page is administrated, and understand the moderation processes that may take place, as well as how my presence may influence this.



Engaging with online communities

- I will establish contact with the administrators in a professional and personable way, remaining mindful of my responsibility to ensure I provide information necessary to reassure admins of my identity and intentions.
- I have recognised the contribution of group/ page administrator's knowledge and experience about the groups and membership and have considered how to value their time and potential as collaborator, where appropriate.
- Mutual and continued respect between myself and the online communities is at the forefront of any research participation, and I have made clear how I will use their data, for what purpose and gained consent.
- I have embedded a process of iterative consent into my research with the communities.
- I have considered group dynamics and have established a mutual code of conduct for participation.



Privacy and wellbeing

- I will ensure that there is a way in which any aspects of research process and consent which may be uncomfortable for either myself or the communities, can be questioned.
- I have reviewed my own profile I am using for the research and privacy settings to ensure these are appropriate, and that reflect a safe approach to sharing my personal information online.
- I will ensure that throughout the process I give time to reflect on my own safety and wellbeing.

Reflections for Administrators of (Facebook) groups

You have been approached by a researcher who is interested in the group for their research. Here there are some questions you might want to have clarity on before going ahead:

1. What is all this about?

- Has the researcher established their identity clearly (e.g. providing institutional web profiles, contact details external to the platform)
- Is the objective and extent of the collaboration clear to me? – Ask any questions you might have about the project, study, funder, institution, etc.

2. It sounds interesting! Let's check the details

- How does the researcher plan to make us aware about the research in the group? What are their plans for getting informed consent? Does that align with the code of conduct of my group? Does the group need a code of conduct if we do not have one already? Is going to be a one-off or a repeated process?
- What is going to happen to the data collected? Do I know where is going to be stored, for how long and under what conditions? What access are we going to have to the data collected?
- How are we going to collaborate and for how long? What does exactly the researcher expect from me? Agree a plan with the researcher including starting and end date. What are your preferences regarding communicating with the researcher about the study (means, frequency)?
- Who can I contact (and how) if I feel something is off? Has the researcher provided external contacts in their institution that I could contact if something goes wrong?

3. Everything looks good! Let's see how the study goes!

- Reach-out to the researcher if questions arise or if something feels off and discuss the situation with them. If their response is unsatisfactory, feel free to reach out to the other contacts provided by the researcher.
- Protect your time and energy and feel free to set boundaries around your role as administrator!

Further reading

This isn't a definitive list of references, but an interesting reading selection which has informed our work, and which might be a useful starting point for those wanting to take their plans further.

Most universities will have their own guidance on approaching digital ethics – look first at the protocols suggested for your institution if you are an academic researcher.

Several professional organisations publish their own guidelines on conducting research using social media or other digital platforms. Check to see when they update their guidance.

The most focused of these is possibly The Association of Internet Researchers last updating their guidance in 2019 (Creative Commons)

The British Sociological Society has a dedicated journal for online research and published their Digital Research Ethics Annexe guidance most recently in 2016.

The UK Research Integrity Office provides a range of guidance on research, including the ethics of Good practice in research: Internet-mediated research, 2016. There are also some helpful webinars on the UKRIO YouTube channel.

At the time of writing, more recent guidelines are from 2021 with the British Psychological Society (DOI:<https://doi.org/10.53841/bpsrep.2021.rep155>), CDCS Social Media Research: Ethical Guidance for Researchers at The University of Edinburgh

Rather than provide specific titles, we leave you with a list of writers working in the field of Digital Ethics and recommend you explore their well-known and most recent publications. Several have accessible blog posts, articles and book extracts hosted on their own websites for those unable to access academic libraries:

Christine Baym; Anja Bechmann; Charles Ess; Susan Halford; Christine Hine; Robert Kozinets; Sarah Pink; Michael Zimmer.

New and exciting writing on social media platforms is being published constantly - we encourage you to explore what is resonating with and challenging your views on ethics in this area.

This document was produced as a deliverable of the research project “Navigating Digital Ethics for Rural Research: Guidelines and recommendations for researchers and administrators of social media groups” (DigiEthics). Digiethics is a transdisciplinary project seeking to advance digital ethics by co-designing guidelines for engaging Facebook groups . This project was funded by the by the British Academy Early Career Research Network Scotland Hub Seed Fund 2023.

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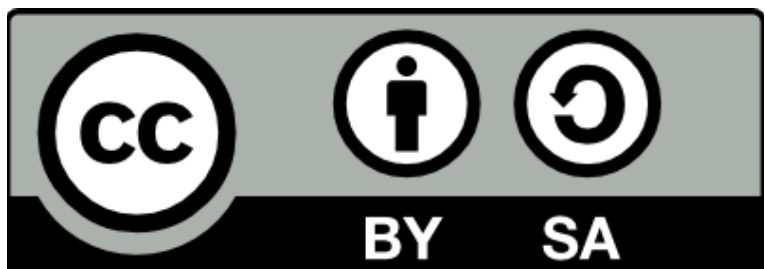
This document is available online with background information at: <https://www.hutton.ac.uk/research/projects/digiethics-navigating-digital-ethics-rural-research> If you have read/used this document and you have any comments or feedback you would like to share with us, we would love to hear from you. Please contact diana.valero@hutton.ac.uk



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