Does Facebook Have Civil Servants? On Governmentality and Computational Social Science

R. Stuart Geiger

UC-Berkeley School of Information

Berkeley, California, USA

stuart@stuartgeiger.com

Abstract and Personal Introduction

My research has long involved close partnerships with the institutions who govern the socio-technical systems I study. In studying issues of socialization, gatekeeping, and governance in Wikipedia and scientific research networks, I have worked inside and outside of two institutions that govern the platforms I study: the Wikimedia Foundation and the Long-Term Ecological Research Network (LTER). From this perspective, I have been working towards an understanding of research ethics that takes into account the kinds of ethical relations which are already present in these and other institutions.

As I argue in this paper, the existing ethical relations at work inside institutions like Facebook, Wikimedia, reddit, or LTER are often ones of governmentality [1], bound up in a complex ethic of care about what it means for administrators to govern platforms for "their users." While we must not blindly accept these existing ethical relations, we must take them into account when discussing research ethics, rather than assume these often-private institutions have an ethical vacuum -- which can be filled by a regulatory notion of ethics from academia. As such, I argue that we need an understanding of research ethics which is focused on a

collective notion of what the good life is and what it means to flourish in a common social-technical space.

Governing privately-owned public platforms

As a number of researchers have noted [2], many social media platforms—the places where we interact with each other on an everyday basis—are public spaces. Unlike a public park, a privately-owned public space like Facebook is controlled in a manner closer to that of a mall, whose private ownership may come into conflict with its public use. And as Gillespie argues in an article on the rhetoric of the term 'platform' [3], this term has both a political and an architectural connotation, in addition to its technical meaning in software engineering. In a recent article expanding on Gillespie's work [4], I've argued that these political and architectural metaphors of the platform often combine, implying that these platforms operate in ways that are closer to how sovereigns govern territories. In other words, if we stand on the platform that Facebook or reddit has built and maintained for us, then it also makes sense to think of the place where we dwell as social beings as a kind of territory in which Facebook or reddit has sovereign authority over us.

This notion of platforms as territories and those who own the servers as sovereigns is quite old (see [5], [6]), but it takes on new relevance in the context of research ethics. If we think of a platform like Facebook or reddit in this way, then what is the nature of the relationship between us ordinary users and those who produce knowledge in the course of designing, building, maintaining, and keeping order in these territories for us? What modes of governance are at work when knowledge about inappropriate behavior are delegated to actions like flagging [7], which are often algorithmically analyzed using blacked-boxed mechanisms?

In response, we must recognize that academic and industry researchers who work for institutions institutions that build and operate our digitally-mediated public spaces are either directly doing governance work themselves or building systems that have been delegated governance work. In this sense, researchers can be said to form a core part of the elite civil service and bureaucratic corps of our era, in a time where working to remove posts flagged as inappropriate on Facebook may net more economic and cultural capital than working in other entry-level positions in public service bureaucracies.

In focusing on the 'privately-owned' aspect of public spaces like Facebook, it is easy to explain away controversies over research (like the notable emotion contagion study) as just another case of capitalism run amok. Yet it is far too simple to just critique corporate capitalism for failing to include serious ethical considerations in the search for pure profit. Rather, the emotion contagion study shows us a more complicated story. It should not just be seen as a professional dispute among social scientists about informed consent procedures or the existing data loophole. More than these specific regulatory understandings about the actions of individual social scientists, the emotion contagion controversy shows that we have a profound ethical and political disagreement about what the good life is—and how we ought to work together towards building a world in which we can all flourish. Decisions about how to design, build, and govern a socio-technical space are not abstract, theoretical concerns

that only cause harm (or good) when they involve interacting with research subjects. Rather, they are suffused with an ethic of care for users – for good or ill. And, as I argue with a comparison to the role of statistics in early-modern Europe, social science research and ethical-political life have long been linked.

Governmentality: scaling up governance work

At the heart of this matter is a question of what Michel Foucault called governmentality, or how populations are able to be known by governments who rule them, so that the sovereign can know how to properly govern their subjects. As Foucault defines it, it is the "techniques and strategies by which a society is rendered governable." [1] It is a question that has always been part of politics, but as Foucault argues, it took on a different character in early-modern Europe with the invention of statistics—which etymologically means "science of the state." Just as the new nation-states of Europe needed demography, economics, public health, and other emerging forms of knowledge to govern their people well, so does Facebook need new kinds of knowledge. Yet what kind of knowledge is seen as necessary for Facebook's 6,618 employees (mostly in Silicon Valley) to govern a space inhabited by 1.32 billion people (mostly not in Silicon Valley)?

In this case, computational social science is necessarily situated within an ethical relation, just not the same kind as is typically seen in research ethics with its focus on potential direct harms committed by researchers on subjects (such as manipulating a person's emotion without their consent). Instead, the ethical issues around A/B tests and large-scale statistics are closer to the ones bound up in the modes of knowledge production that emerged in early-modern Europe. At this time, feudal kingdoms based on networks of alliances and hierarchical chains of allegiances fell, while new states arose, based on the growth of a nation in a bounded territory. As Foucault discusses, ideas about what it meant to govern well dramatically changed. In the older discourses, the art and science of governance focused on advising sovereigns how to hold onto power (Machiavelli's model) or how to be a good philosopher-king and rule with consent of the governed (Plato's model).

As the nation-state emerged in modern Europe, government became rationalized: not just an art, but also a science. Newer understandings of the art and science of governing shifted over to focus on phenomena like birth and death rates, agricultural and wealth production, trade imbalances, healthcare, education, immigration—all issues that needed social scientists to give concrete findings about how the sovereign state should govern the nation, which involved a different set of responsibilities than feudal monarchies. Similarly, the A/B test comes on the scene in the same way that the census or bill of mortality does: it identifies a way to represent the people to the sovereign, whose governance work has to operate at such a massive scale compared to those in previous eras. The questions are even rather similar, bound up in a strangely-similar fascination with 'growth.'

Today, ubiquitous user experiments and large-scale computational analysis of trace data have become the default ways of understanding what it means to build and maintain a public space that "your users" will find engaging and compelling. It is in the financial interests of these platforms to make their platform into the kind

of space where people will want to spend a large portion of their lives. The problem Facebook—and all major privately-owned public spaces—have to deal with is that this mode of governance is operating at a scale that is far greater of other kinds of public spaces. It therefore requires a sophisticated, direct, and scalable way of understanding what it means to do a good job governing for a population that is now neck-and-neck with the People's Republic of China, the largest nation-state in history. In short, computational social science has become a core part of what it means for this new class of civil servants to govern a privately-owned public space well—particularly at these scales, where so few are responsible for governing so many.

From regulatory ethics to political ethics

While social scientists should certainly debate the specific procedures around these studies, it is dangerous to assume that the institutionalized ethics of Institutional Review Boards and U.S.-based federal human subjects research guidelines are the only kind of ethical relations that exist around these studies. In other words, it is dangerous to assume that there is an ethical vacuum in tech industry social science that academic social science needs to fill. This fully ignores the already-existing (and rather well-entrenched) ethical relations at work in industry social science. This ethical relation is governmentality, which is a useful lens to examine the discourses of ethics, politics, and knowledge that have arisen in response to the emotion contagion study.

A common response on all sides of the emotion contagion controversy is that there are thousands of similar studies that we do not see, but certainly take place every day, on almost every aspect of almost every major privately-owned public space that we spend our lives in. However, this has relevance far beyond the debates about what the specific procedures of research studies ought to be, such as whether researchers upheld longstanding standards of informed consent. In addition, this means we also need to understand how these kinds of studies are not isolated events that need to be controlled by a regulatory notion of ethic, but rather are part of an entire suite of governmental practices that work to inform developers and executives about how they ought to govern the people who inhabit their territories through code.

Much of the characterization of the Facebook emotion contagion study has cast it as un-ethical, or simply a-ethical, lacking a consideration of ethics. Rather, we need to understand that there is a much-overlooked ethical relation that exists when this new civil service—made up of developers, designers, social scientists, managers, executives, and advertisers—all can rally around the idea of computational social science and human-computer interaction research. And in particular, we must examine not only specific A/B tests that may cause direct harm to subjects, but the broader idea of the A/B test as something which is done on behalf of users. As the study's lead author of the Facebook emotion contagion study Adam Kramer wrote in his public statement, "The goal of all of our research at Facebook is to learn how to provide a better service." [9] The open question is: what kind of world do we live in when experimentation is the default governmental strategy when our new sovereigns are unsure about how to govern us properly?

The A/B test as the postmodern referendum

Today, we are similarly seeing a deployment of all kinds of knowledge production, implemented so our new sovereigns can figure out how to govern us well, how to make the territory they control into a space for us to flourish. Today's clicktracking scripts are the census workers of yesterday, keenly interested in making sure that the territory controlled by the sovereign is laid out in such a way that is ostensibly good for us. The knowledge production at work in fields like social computational science, human-computer interaction, or user-centered design are explicitly being deployed within this kind of an ethical relation.

An A/B test serves as a kind of popular referendum on how a public space is to be built and operated, but one in which we are never told that we are voting. Instead, there is an ethic of care for users that often situates developers, designers, and researchers more as hyper-rational bureaucrats working behind the scenes, compared to the feudalistic model of the kind who builds and maintains cascading chains of delegated responsibility [8]. In this newer model of governmentality, those who do governance work for the sovereign are professionals, employed because they are qualified to do this work. They are typically genuinely interested in doing a good job at the immense burden that has been placed on them: governing for an entire population's needs and desires.

Conclusion: Whose Users Are They?

There is something important about a system in which leaders do not simply govern the people with their continued tacit consent, but rather where leaders govern on behalf of the people. The former is the bare minimum a government needs to maintain legitimacy and prevent either an uprising or a mass exodus, according to the Machiavellian school of governance. The latter is what is generally seen as necessary for a democratic society to flourish, according to most treatises on governance in Western political philosophy since Plato's *Republic*. The issue is one of ethics—not the narrow understanding of ethics that regulates whether specific decisions taken by individuals are right or wrong, but the collective, political ethics that asks us to imagine what kind of a world we want to flourish in and what it would take for us to get there.

This means that issues around site redesigns, advertiser tracking, privacy policies, obscenity standards, real name policies, experimental studies, and so on are not just ethical issues about what individuals ought to do or not do, but political questions about how public space is to be governed. As such, questions about research ethics (particularly about user experimentation) are of the same general type as more explicitly 'political' questions about regulating appropriate content and behavior. There is the argument that a private company has every legal right to make whatever decisions it wants about a public space it owns, but even if this is true, it does not mean that all of these decisions are somehow outside of the realm of governmental ethics.

For we lowly users – who are often referred to in the possessive form as "your users" in HCI – these privately-owned public spaces are not our own, but they are where we exist in public. Therefore, issues about how these public spaces are designed and operated are, by definition, a matter of public concern. This tension between Facebook as privately-owned and as a public space is at the heart of not just the recent

emotion contagion study, but also a number of other controversies around contemporary social media platforms. These issues require that we expand our view of ethics from a regulatory one to a political one, going beyond a discourse that focuses on undesirable actions made by individuals.

We must ask how these controversies speak to fundamental disagreements about what a public space is and how it is governed by a privately-owned institution that is ultimately deeply concerned with its own continued survival—and for good reason. For example, who gets to decide if an experiment ought to be run in order to test a new feature? Should these experiments be made public and conducted with the advice of engaged citizens, like environmental or economic impact reports are – or like many of the Wikimedia Foundation's A/B tests are?

Only when we take the existing ethical relations of a governmental care for users into account can we work to understand – and intervene in – the roles of computational social scientists and human-computer interaction researchers in relation to the institutions that govern the populations they study. It is good to have a regulatory understanding of research ethics that is focused on direct harms to subjects, but we must expand our view if we want to understand the broader issues that are at work the world that is increasingly being governed through this new civil servant corps.

References

[1]   M. Foucault, "Governmentality," in *The Foucault effect: Studies in Governmentality*, G. Burchell, C. Gordon, and P. Mille, Eds. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1991, pp. 87–104.

[2]   D. Boyd, "Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics, and Implications," in *Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites*, Z. Papacharissi, Ed. 2010, pp. 39–58.

[3]   T. Gillespie, "The politics of 'platforms,'" *New Media Soc.*, vol. 12, no. 3, pp. 347–364, Feb. 2010.

[4]   R. S. Geiger, "Bots, bespoke, code and the materiality of software platforms," *Information, Commun. Soc.*, vol. 17, no. 3, pp. 342–356, Mar. 2014.

[5]   L. Lessig, *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace*. New York: Basic Books, 1999.

[6]   J. Barlow, "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace," Feb-1996. http://homes.eff.org/~barlow/Declaration-Final.html.

[7]   K. Crawford and T. Gillespie, "What is a flag for? Social media reporting tools and the vocabulary of complaint," *New Media & Society*, 2014.

[8]   M. Callon and B. Latour, "Unscrewing the big Leviathan," in *Advances in Social Theory and Methodology*, K. Knorr-Cetina and A. V. Cicourel, Eds. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981, pp. 277–303.

[9]   Kramer, A. Untitled Statement. *Facebook.* Accessed online 24 Sept 2014 at https://www.facebook.com/akramer/posts/10152987150867796