CASE STUDY: Tinder and Travel

I - The case in outline:

Researchers Jenna Condie and Garth Lean decided to research the ways in which location-aware smartphone apps mediate contemporary travel experiences. They focused on Tinder, an app designed to help people meet potentially like-minded others who are nearby. Tinder has a premium version which allows users to change their geolocation and so 'meet' people in a place they're due to visit before they arrive.

Social media research has been around for a few years now but generally involves the largest platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Research via Tinder is a recent development. Tinder is a location-aware smartphone app with tens of millions of users worldwide (Twitter and Facebook have hundreds of millions of users). Tinder enables its users to view, and either accept or reject, the profiles of other users who are physically near to them. Users can reject others by 'swiping left' and accept by 'swiping right'. If two people accept each other, a match is made and they can then communicate by private message. Thus far the service is free, but there is also a premium 'Passport' feature which lets users change their geolocations and so 'travel' digitally. This means users can make connections and plans with people in a place they're due to visit before they arrive.

Jenna Condie and Garth Lean, researchers based in Sydney, became interested in the possibilities of using Tinder to research ways in which location-aware smartphone apps mediate contemporary travel experiences (Condie, Lean, and Wilcockson 2017). On moving to Sydney, Jenna had begun using Tinder to help her meet people locally, which led to her considering its potential as a data source. She discussed this with her colleague Garth, a researcher of mobilities and travel. He was not a user of Tinder and was initially reluctant to get involved because the app has a reputation for enabling casual sex. Also, when they started discussing the possibilities of their research with other colleagues, some perceived it as trivial and unsuitable for serious academic research. These conflicting perceptions contributed to difficult identity issues which led to some methodological decisions that the researchers later overturned.

STIMULUS: *What are your first thoughts about any ethical implications of conducting such research?*

POSSIBLE RESPONSES MAY ADDRESS:

- What is the 'value' added or potential for knowledge gain? (Is it 'worth' doing?)
- To what extent will researchers' own and others' perceptions of social media affect how social media research is approached and conceived?
- What ethical protocols might apply or are available for this sort of work?
- Given the work is necessarily innovative, to what extent do standard guidelines, codes etc. help researchers?
- Under what circumstances should researchers fully disclose their research purpose when entering a social media site where they plan to collect data?
- How fully could the available research ethics review system understand the ethical implications of this research?

- To what extent can research be considered ethical if researchers change their methodology part way through?

II – Engaging the site

Both Condie and Lean were explicit in their Tinder profiles that they were using the app for research purposes. Lean, less familiar with location-aware social discovery apps, also joined some others: Bumble, Happn, and Backpackr. Both researchers found difficulty in managing the boundary between their personal and professional identities in these online spaces. For example, Lean received a message from an unknown woman via Bumble which said 'I am so ready to be used for academic purposes', and Condie received one from a man on Tinder saying 'Am I now a case study?' They found that their online and offline lives could not be kept as separate as they might have wished.

STIMULUS: *What are the implications of this?*

POSSIBLE RESPONSES MAY ADDRESS:

- Such research raises the boundaries between…
- …the personal and the professional,
- …the virtual and the real,
- …the public and the private,
- …in research using location-aware social media –
- …or any social media research for that matter.
- To what extent can/should each of these issues be kept separate from online research activity?
- For any that can or should, how might this be achieved?
- To what extent should this also be a consideration in conventional research?

III – Immediate Ethical Concerns

These and other interactions raised ethical issues long before Condie and Lean had applied for formal ethical approval. They struggled to find precedent for ethical research on Tinder, though the Association of Internet Researchers' ethical guidance helped by suggesting that research design in online spaces should be context-specific.

Some aspects of Tinder are in itself ethically questionable. For example, Tinder takes a binary approach to gender and sexual orientation. Users have to declare their gender as male or female, and state whether they wish to see profiles of women or men. This excludes non-binary people, plus others who define as genderqueer or genderfluid, and it makes no space for trans people or bisexuals. This means that collaboration is necessary for research on Tinder if data from both women and men are to be included.

STIMULUS: *It appears the researchers effectively started their research before seeking ethical approval. Is that acceptable or 'normal'? Given the 'ethically questionable' nature of Tinder should they even be studying it?*

POSSIBLE RESPONSES MAY ADDRESS:

- How can researchers most usefully and ethically plan research in a new field of study where there is little or no literature to guide them?
- What aspects of research work are ethically acceptable to carry out before formal ethical approval is received?
- When and how can researchers justify studying people taking part in ethically questionable activities?
- What are the implications of conducting research in an online arena that is in itself ethically questionable?

IV – Seeking Formal Ethics Approval

The researchers initially decided on a design involving an extractive quantitative content analysis of Tinder user profiles, to establish the prevalence of "Tinder travel" as a social phenomenon, followed by an online questionnaire. Their original plan was to conduct the content analysis manually, analysing profiles according to a predetermined coding scheme. This would not require a record of users' profiles. One reason they chose this approach is that there is no way to ask for informed consent on Tinder except from people with whom you are a 'match'. The researchers argued that the information in users' profiles was pre-generated and already in the public domain.

However, as reasonably experienced social media researchers, they were also aware that this doesn't necessarily mean it is fair game for researchers. Also, Tinder profiles cannot be viewed unless they meet the viewer's specified criteria for attributes such as gender, age range, and location, and they are not searchable in the way that profiles are on other platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. This raises questions of exactly how 'public' are Tinder profiles anyway? The researchers also cite surveys by NatCen (2014) and Ipsos MORI (2015) showing that when people are asked, they are more likely to refuse than consent to their online data being used by researchers. These findings add weight to the argument that data people generate online is not necessarily regarded as public, even if a member of the public can view it under some circumstances. This shifting boundary between the public and the private is a recurring problem for social media researchers.

Condie and Lean then discovered an automated way to collect data using an Application Programming Interface (API). Tinder's Terms of Service (ToS) clearly state that no user should use any automated method of data mining. However, the researchers argued that the ToS as a whole was focused on preventing commercial use of the app or any detriment to users. Their view was that their purposes were academic, not commercial, and that no harm could come to users because of the data management procedures they had developed.

Condie and Lean gained formal ethical approval to use this method.

STIMULUS:

- *How should researchers work with social media companies' terms and conditions?*
- *What are your views of the REC's actions in approving the study?*

POSSIBLE RESPONSES MAY ADDRESS:

- When is it acceptable to use automated data mining techniques for research and when should researchers mine data manually?
- What effect have recent research ethics scandals, such as those involving Cambridge Analytica and Facebook, had on social media research?
- How should researchers manage conflicts between ToCs and ethical research practice?

V – Amending the Research Design and Protocol

The researchers received formal ethical approval to use the API but then thought better of it. This was partly because of the tenuousness of their argument about the ToS and partly because the API would create a dataset which would lead to a permanent record of users' profiles outside of Tinder.

At a more macro level, this kind of 'big data' approach ignores issues of privilege and social inequality. Condie and Lean cite Mason (2016) who showed how Tinder users' images of themselves doing humanitarian and unpaid work, intended to attract others, reproduce hierarchies of race.

They also cite Race (2015) who points out that Tinder users are sufficiently privileged to have access to a smartphone and the Internet, as well as private spaces for sexual encounters. The ability to travel is a further sign of privilege and Condie and Lean found they were unable to ignore the replication of existing social structures in the interactions made possible through Tinder. In particular, Tinder's API is called 'The Hoes'. This misogynistic label is in line with the widespread abuse of women in society, including online spaces. The researchers wanted no complicity with such abuse. Instead, they moved into using more participatory, critical and feminist methodologies to enable them to pay closer attention to the relationship between Tinder and the problematic social structures that create and/or perpetuate inequalities.

Condie and Lean suggest a few reasons for their initial gravitation towards a quantitative approach. These include: the prominence of 'big data' in academic and other research; the attraction of the way data mining puts distance between researcher and participants which reduces the troubles of identity management in online spaces; the way the ethical framework for their institution privileges positivist methodologies. This can restrict the possibility of beginning a research project within an alternative ethical framework.

STIMULUS:

- *Recognising that research designs may need to be fluid – given circumstances in the field – what should the researchers do about the fact they have received REC approval?*
- *To what extent should researchers be concerned with replications of privilege and/or inequality?*

POSSIBLE RESPONSES MAY ADDRESS:

- When should researchers go back to RECs for further input?
- How much influence should RECs expect to have over unforeseen changes during the research process?
- If researchers should be concerned with replications of privilege and/or inequality, should they be concerned with all such replications or some more than others?
- If 'some more than others', which, and why?

V – Outcomes and Reflections for Future Practice

Condie and Lean did go ahead with the online questionnaire. However, despite widespread promotion of the project on various social media platforms and online travel forums, they only received a couple of dozen responses. These were useful and led to some follow-up interviews. The data from these, together with the researchers' reflections on their ethical experiences and their revised methodologies, led them to move towards a digital storytelling method for the next phase of their research. However, this again threw up new ethical problems, particularly around the anonymity of participants and others who participants spoke of within their stories. Condie and Lean had to devise a moderation system for the website where the stories were published, so that they could change names or locations to avoid any danger of individual identification.

The researchers claimed in their ethics application that no relationships would exist between participants and researchers. However, they found that this was not achievable in practice, because they had to use their personal Facebook profiles to log into Tinder. That connected the two social networks and this, plus the use of geolocations, meant that people they knew were likely to be included in their sample.

It is clear that the relationship between this research and ethical governance was troubled throughout. Condie and Lean worked within a prescribed structure of ethical governance which they had learned to game. They reflect on the need for researchers doing innovative work to lobby for the system to be changed to enable alternative approaches. They conclude that when you can hold your research field in your hand, and take it with you everywhere you go, then the rules of research need to be rewritten (Condie, Lean and James 2018); a call that was being made simultaneously by researchers on the other side of the planet (Samuel et al 2018).

STIMULUS:

- *Did this work fail or did it succeed?*

POSSIBLE RESPONSES MAY ADDRESS:

- The researchers claimed that no relationships between researchers and participants/responders was likely. Was this naïve, or duplicitous and misleading to the REC?Are new 'rules' for research required as a result of innovative work?

- What value is there (if any) in accounts of such messy research?

SUMMARY LESSONS LEARNED: HOW RESEARCH RESULTS ARE USED

Research results such as these, with much of their 'mess' on show, are rarely published. It is notable that this account was found in a book chapter, not an academic journal. Yet these kinds of results are really useful for reflection and learning about ethical issues in social media – and other – research. To assess the usefulness of research results, the practical experiences of trying to do research ethically and with integrity are necessary. In other words, this cannot be done in abstract reflection, but rather in terms of 'real world' research examples. Indeed, much ethical reflection requires the experience of the 'context' in which research has to be conducted. So what are the summary 'lessons' learned here?

Research governance and ethics review systems must keep pace with methodological and technological innovation. This requires a flexibility not often afforded by ethics codes or guidelines that are too fixed in their use. A 'dynamic' capacity has to be built in to such structures so that they adequately and rapidly change with the times. Internet research in general and social media research in particular invites such responsiveness. But such rapid change is also seen in biotechnologies, nanotechnologies, AI/robotics, environmental sciences, labour markets, economic and financial spheres and so on.

Policymakers and regulators have an equal responsibility to consider whether and how rules and redress can be developed to facilitate such responsiveness. Some recognition that existing systems and structures may have to be tested and challenged by researchers coming across the restrictions, injustices, perpetuations of inequality and so on that can be perpetrated by the rigidity of existing regulation. It is only by conducting innovative practices can the flaws and limitations of existing systems for governance and ethics review be disclosed. Ethics reviewers are party to this, requiring a culture of facilitation, openness to new approaches and tolerance of the practical difficulties of research in the field.

But regulators cannot be left to produce ethical practice alone – all stakeholders are involved. Research conducted with integrity depends upon: "…distributed collective responsibility. Ethical research practice becomes a mutual accomplishment of all participants – research subjects, researchers, commissioners, funders and managers." (Iphofen 2009: 166) Research results from a case such as this Tinder example show that all stakeholders have an obligation to learn from each other and ensure the lessons learned are carried forward into different topics, fields, disciplines and professions.