

Media Anthropology Network
European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA)
E-Seminar Series

<http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars>

E-Seminar 49
Producing Ethics [for the digital near-future]

by

[Annette N. Markham](#)

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Department of Aesthetics and Communication - Information Science

Discussant
Adam Fish
Lancaster University, UK

9-23 December 2014

Veronica Barassi v.barassi@gold.ac.uk

December 9th 2014

Dear All,

The E-seminar 'Producing Ethics' is now open. It will run until Tuesday the 23rd of December 2014.

You can find Annette N. Markham's paper online. (<http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars>). The discussant Adam Fish (Lancaster University), will send us his comments tomorrow. Once Annette has had the chance to respond to Adam's comments, I will open the discussion to all.

All best,

Veronica

Veronica Barassi v.barassi@gold.ac.uk

December 10th 2014

Dear All,

Please find attached the comments by our discussant Dr Adam Fish (Lancaster University) to the paper 'Producing Ethics' by Dr Annette N. Markham (Aarhus University).

If you haven't had the chance to read it, you can find Annette N. Markham's paper online (<http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars>).

All the best

Veronica

Veronica Barassi v.barassi@gold.ac.uk

December 10th 2014

Dear All,

Apparently I seem to have a problem with uploading attachments, my apologies.

Please find below the comments by our discussant Dr Adam Fish (Lancaster University) to the paper 'Producing Ethics' by Dr Annette N. Markham (Aarhus University).

If you haven't had the chance to read it, you can find Annette N. Markham's paper online (<http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars>).

All the best

Veronica

Discussant Comments: E-Seminar 'Producing Ethics' by DR ADAM FISH (Lancaster University)

This is a smart and important text for reconsidering how and why ethics should be generated within academia. Discussing ethics is nearly always problematic for a discipline espousing cultural relativism—and so it is also quite bold. Markham investigates the social production of ethics in a world of unethical corporate and governmental information practices including the NSA dragnet and Facebook's recent manipulative social experiment. The book chapter accurately claims humans

are increasingly framed not as beings but as data bodies by interpellating algorithms and commercial frames. Through our data practices we are self-regulating towards neoliberal subjectification. Into this dystopia we need to “produce ethics” through collective and bottom-up means. This is a necessary indeed. But the text could be even bolder by more clearly mounting a critique of the ethics of corporate social mediation and the governmentality of surveillance. In its call for the social production of ethics, the chapter falls prey to the very digital discourse it ostensibly rejects. What I mean by this is that the central claim of the chapter, that researchers need to take back the framing of ethics through a “creative,” “disruptive,” practice of “remix,” is the same claims made by the “Web 2.0” companies of Silicon Valley that are doing the unethical research to which we as scholars must respond. We need to pay closer attention to the materiality, political economy, as well as the discourse of communication in our reframing of ethics.

Redeeming a term critiqued by critical social media scholars, “produsage,” Markham claims that “As we respond to these events, we all engage in what could be called ‘producing ethics.’” The “we” in this claim are academics, “ethics” are moral frames, and “producing” refers to collective Wikipedia-style social production. I have criticized this term for its claim that the internet “democratizes” the means of media production while ignoring how the exchange value of produced immaterial objects are captured by information corporations resulting in exploitation of the so-called producer. It is now obvious, in light of the examples illustrated by Markham, that both Facebook and the NSA are in the same business of harvesting the volunteered data from producers and using the data to monitor and manipulate populations. On the one hand, Markham is critical of this process and provides graphic examples of how these relationships are framed by commercial media. On the other hand, in not rejecting the term she fails to cull the digital discourse of the very information companies that claim that social media is good for us, non-alienating, and non-exploitative.

Evidence for how big data misframes humans comes from commercial culture, namely a Samsung Galaxy II advertisement in which data bits graphically swirl around and provide the ground of potential for an urban protagonist. A second case of datafied subjectivity comes from online quizzes which hail users to act like mechanical turks submitting personal data for algorithmic responses. A third example focuses on the shift of cryptographic responsibility from corporations to individuals and illustrates a self-regulatory feature of neoliberal subjectification within which algorithms form an important duty. This rather anecdotal evidence is marshalled to argue that we are increasingly framed by corporate informationalism as not bodies but data circuits. Markham is right in identifying this as troubling. While made by people, algorithms are governed by the laws of mathematics not the policies of democratically elected regulators. They conflate people and data, empirical metrics and social signals, into a malaise confusing to all except big data itself. She asks, what ethics will emerge from this world of algorithmic power and corporate informationalism? While this question has broad and contemporary implications, Markham focuses inwardly to investigate how research ethics in the information age will develop. This book chapter is not a critique of the ethics of social media corporations but rather a call for academics to consider the social construction of ethics in the same way we consider the social construction of technology, policy, and so on and so forth. This is something of a let-down, I must admit, as I was hoping Markham would use this set-up to mount a critique of the Foucauldian informational society of discipline and the Deleuzian informational society of (self) control.

While intra-university reflexivity on pedagogy, administration, publishing, and the politics of research funding are necessary, I hoped for a more political economic critique of how the absence of robust corporate digital ethics, plus the reductive datafication of users into big data metrics, has increased alienation while decreasing ethics. At that point, a forthcoming normative assault on the capitalistic, deregulatory, and individualistic technolibertarian logics of Silicon Valley would be

both admissible and welcome. Instead, readers get an assessment, to which I fully agree, that regulation of these industries is necessary. But instead of a call to grassroots movement of techno-lifestyle politickers, digital detoxers, cyber rejectionists, DDoS activists, hacktivist interventionists, and digital social entrepreneurs providing other social media options we get an important and insular critique of the IRB process academics are accustomed to hearing around the office. Markham certainly wants us to mobilize our agonistic and affectual potentials and she mobilizes Dana Boyd and Z. Tupekci towards those purposes but all the other academics who are not shocked form a team of straw men. I agree that a massive overhaul of research ethics in the age of mass and unwarranted surveillance is needed. I've reported elsewhere that the very use of Microsoft Outlook or Google's Gmail as default university email clients post-Snowden should be a violation of our IRB agreements to protect research subjects' privacy. Academics are largely silent on this issue or see it as too technologically difficult with which to deal. But the problems impacting the adoption of ethical cryptography within the academy are also the problems outside of academy. My wish would be that the book chapter had a more ambitious scope. IRB processes are important but this chapter has the potential to talk to wider debates about ethics and social media instead of being a dialogue amongst scholars.

This practical approach continues as readers are provided an example of good social ethical production, the author's own work in constructing an open-ended ethical framework for the Association of Internet Researchers, the leading international professional body for studies of the information society. In bringing up internet research, I was left with a final concern. If we are to produce ethics will we not be using the very proprietary and surveilled "crowdsourcing" platforms we should be rejecting because of their lack of research ethics? If our job is to be "remix" research ethics should we not pay closer attention to the political economy of social media and the infrastructures for such "creative disruption". This emphasis on materiality may seem like a naïve empiricist's critique but it is important that in discussions of software power we tack back and forth from the material to the social in order understand the social construction of the technology. Software is simultaneously material and discursive and requires a mixed method approach in its investigation. Claims for "creative play, remix, and reverse linearity" would sound great in the boardrooms of offices in Palo Alto and Silicon Roundabout in London. If we are to truly disrupt ethics we need to pay closer attention to not only the material means of communication but also its content.

Annette Markham amarkham@gmail.com

December 11th 2014

Hi All,

Thanks for participating in the e-seminar and working with me on this draft paper, "producing ethics." Also, a special thanks to Adam for responding to this paper. Adam, I really appreciate the depth with which you saw the argument through the mess of this draft, and for your critique of my ending (or central) point.

I have a very similar critique of my work as you express: I have become too comfortable talking to other academics about research methods and ethics.

I've been struggling to find the voice, content, and confidence to speak to broader audience and I obviously have missed the mark yet again. This is an ongoing challenge for me and I am happy for the provocations you provide

I have some thoughts in response to your critique:

1) The material/discursive I'm curious about how you are characterizing the material-discursive. On one hand, i hear you suggesting a stronger interplay between material/social, but then, you mention the material/discursive followed by 'material/media/content. To me, these are not the same. Are you thinking of a particular relation, or just suggesting a broader analysis that would cover more possible combinations, to complexify the relations?

I ask because as you end your response, I'm thinking about how to take up your challenge (and i'm grateful you're making it). If you'll indulge me, let me think aloud for a moment, as I work through how I could/would do this. You see, I don't generally use political economy concepts—my training in speech communication/rhetorical criticism/organizational theory plants my gaze at the discourse/structure interaction, but at the micro-social level of understanding how it happens, rather than what it means at a broad cultural level. On the other hand, I have training in frankfurt school critical theory, so I should be able to meet your challenge....Here, I would consider how discourse functions both at the surface (content) and deep structure (knowledge logics) levels. While we might be able to see some stuff (material/discursive negotiations and co-constructions of practice and meaning) operating at the surface, the more powerful and potentially damaging stuff occurs at the deep structure levels, whereby power (foucault and power/knowledge) and control (discipline/hegemonic) become both strong, hidden, naturalized and neutralized.

I could build this sort of critical theory argument by drawing on critical organizational communication scholar Stanley Deetz's extension of Habermas to talk about how infrastructures--built from constant material/discursive interactions among situation elements, whether human or non human--can shut down counter discourses before they occur, close off possibilities for alternatives, and create systems of inertia at best and strong 'corporate colonization' and control at worst.

It would be a fairly simple task to find examples of how this has happened or is happening in the way we use social media and how social media is designed (and perhaps in how the algorithms are working). I'd probably build the complexity and continual dialectical tensions by using Gidden's notion of structuration.

Thoughts?

2) At some point, you note, "If we are to produce ethics will we not be using the very proprietary and surveilled "crowdsourcing" platforms we should be rejecting because of their lack of research ethics?" I agree that this should be addressed, so I like that you raise the question, but I would stay away from characterizing it as either a binary choice or double bind (reject or get trapped). It's too simple. We're not likely to stop using prefabricated templates any time soon. And this issue of stepping into pre-formed templates for social interaction is not new. The key issue is to be conscious, rather than blind of the ways these operate. I think we're well on our way toward broader social awareness of surveillance, templated platforms for interaction, and limitations on our possibilities through algorithmic logics.

I agree that we should pay closer attention to the infrastructures that will constrain and enable particular ways of doing 'creative disruption', but this analysis is difficult to move beyond critique. Specifically, at least two problems arise with the pursuit of a political economy argument:

First, if the analysis yields only an option to reject the platforms, it won't succeed to provoke actual change (because we're not rejecting platforms but actually becoming more and more invested / trapped in them).

Second, consciousness alone won't prompt changes in infrastructures or greater transparency by companies (showing us how the algorithms work).

This is the classic critical theory problem, of course...and, it demonstrates the weakness not only in my current argument, but in a broader political economy argument.

3) There are other issues to talk about, but in my initial response, I wanted to address what I think is the crux of your critique and the problem

I face in trying to develop this argument. For me, the key challenge is to figure out how shift from academia, where action is more easily influenced because of the overt concern for ethics, to audiences beyond the academy.

I think it's easier to target individuals to take ownership and responsibility for reframing how their social worlds are constructed. This is already being done in so many ways (political remix videos, fan fiction, guerrilla activities of painting in new bike lanes on streets, changing bathroom signs to be more inclusive, making mini parks out of parking spaces, etc). It's much more difficult to target the internet-specific, software-based, algorithmically-infused infrastructures...How can I pose a "producing ethics" or "creative disruption" challenge to designers and industry? Could one simply lay out the political economy argument and challenge industry to consider what sort of future they're envisioning? To stress the importance of reflecting on what ethics are built into their own systems? I guess as a cynic, I'm not sure I think it would do much good.

But as someone talking on a huge mailing list of media anthropologists, I'm hoping we can talk more about this challenge. How can we move beyond critique, intervene beyond the academy?

Thanks for participating!

Annette

Veronica Barassi v.barassi@gold.ac.uk

December 11th 2014

Dear All,

I would like to thank Adam for his comments and Annette for her response and take the opportunity to open the discussion to all.

It seems to me that there are different issues at stake, which are worth exploring.

I am really looking forward to receiving your comments, ideas and contributions.

All the best

Veronica

Nina Grønlykke Mollerup ninagmollerup@gmail.com

December 12th 2014

Dear Annette and all,

First of all, thank you for this paper. I am thrilled by the unfinishedness of it; much more of our (final) work should embrace the messiness and uncertainties of the process through which it is made, also, like this paper, in its form.

I have two issues I would like to raise.

Firstly, as I was reading your paper I was wondering how one even defines research in a Facebook context (or in other contexts for that matter). That is, Facebook always let algorithms dictate our newsfeed, so if they evaluate those and change them, is that unethical research? Or is it research at all? Was what they did in the experiment you mention significantly different from that? (And is it then their thoughts behind the changes that defines it as research?) Or are we rather always necessarily research subjects as users of facebook (and in many other instances of our lives)? And if so, should we handle ethics differently when carrying out (defined) research? Or is it a broader question of ethics that is not necessarily limited to research?

Secondly, the question about how to challenge corporations such as Facebook without getting trapped in the them or giving up on the advantages they provide (by abandoning them) is interesting and important. The activists I study in Egypt all use Facebook as part of their activism. Many of them are hardcore socialists and interested (among other things) in the demise of such corporations. Yet I don't see a double standard or paradox in them using the platforms provided by corporations to work for their demise. Rather, I see it as a critical evaluation of available options. Not using Facebook would not allow them to disentangle themselves from the grip of (unethical) corporations; what they aim for is an entirely new world order, not just a more ethical stance of corporations. Using them brings them closer to this than not using them would.

I'm looking forward for this e-seminar to get going!

Cheers,
Nina

Tess Conner tessconner@me.com

December 12th 2014

Annette, Nina and All,

I agree with Nina wholeheartedly. It is very thought provoking to read this paper in its current iteration.

I am interested in the point that Nina raises on the relationships between actors 'from below' who use Facebook (its platform and technologies), for social purpose and activism, and in the point that Adam makes about the 'who' that is involved in producing ethics.

The paper and comments raise the issue of how we frame from above or below perspectives in our pursuits of understanding Big Data, its human and datafied elements, and whether or not there is a shorter bridge if you will between social actors (for me these are <http://www.frontlinesms.com/technologies/> and <http://medicmobile.org>) who use Big Data platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

There are cases - such as medicmobile, which works to bring health care data from rural isolated communities to the health systems and NGOs that fund social purpose activities and programs in these communities (as well as provide them with the right resources and materials), in which the people 'from below' work in tandem with Big Data (whether through funding, technology development or the execution of the programs themselves), that cannot be underestimated. FrontlineSMS works with Google (or Google works with FrontlineSMS).

I guess I am asking about that which I view to be a much closer relationship and perhaps a different

ethical issue when Big Data and activists can and do work together. Here, the 'who' is Big Data and social purpose innovators who are focused on tech, and activists (as Nina points out) who leverage Big Data. Producing ethics may benefit from including these innovators and actors in the paper, and demonstrate that there is much less distance between Big Data and humans than we imagine. Producing ethics can also capture 'why' a Google seeks to work with an open source social purpose organization - all of that data on mobile users in specific growth markets??

Control is also shifting where Big Data is concerned:

http://www.theregister.co.uk/2013/11/18/cisco_cloud_problem/

Also, Google now has a its own modular data center solution. The Amazon-CIA deal represents an algorithmic power structure we may be seeing more of. Producing ethics might also explore these shifts and their implications.

See Jaron Lanier http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jaron_Lanier on technology and de/humanization

A review of his book *You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto*

<http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/JTE/v23n2/pdf/schneider.pdf>

He knows the Google executive team from their time prior to launching the company, and has been extremely vocal with them on the topic of technology and de/humanization. You can say he's been a voice for ethics where we may have not imagined many existed.

Newer work:

Nick Couldry and Allison Powell (2014) *Big Data from the Bottom Up*

<http://bds.sagepub.com/content/1/2/2053951714539277.full>

David Lyon (2014) on surveillance and its critiques:

<http://bds.sagepub.com/content/1/2/2053951714541861.full>

Tess

Annette Markham amarkham@gmail.com

December 16th 2014

Hi All,

Sorry for the delay in replying—lots of end-of-semester supervision, teaching, grading, etc.

Nina, you raise some great points in talking about the many complications of how 'research' is defined. Your comments as well as Tess's and Adam's = a good reminder to question the parameters for what constitutes not only research and ethics, but 'Facebook,' 'users,' 'use,' 'researchers,' 'we', and 'them.' The list could go on and on....There are no simple boundaries between self and others, producers and users, and humans and machines. There's also, as you're noting, no easy way to define positionality of stakeholders.

The tricky part (for me, anyway) is defining these interests in the specific cases where they emerge or become salient somehow....yet at the same time not overgeneralising, reducing, or simplifying.

It's a matter of looking at agency from a number of different angles, from below, above, or through (and in this last, i'm thinking of how we can see agency in the throughput of systems, or processes inside software or algorithms whereby influence is created in computational ways). But then, this

gets complicated for me when I start to look at the unique situations where the definitions might turn out very differently once we start to examine them closely and identify the relevant or salient stakeholders, as well as the processes through which ethics are being produced. Methodologically, I might turn to Adele Clarke, who offers the method of situational analysis to help map/ identify different stakeholders, relations, positions, and stances, etc.

Still, where can one go with this sort of analysis? The different agencies and therefore definitions could be endless. I think that's why I turn to producing ethics instead of trying to dive into a political economic critical analysis of the situation. Ethics provides an action orientation (rather than a description or critique or explanation orientation) through which we can think about any situation through the lens of 'ethical digital futures' to reframe or enact the frame differently.

Ok, Nina, that's a bit of a (or very) confusing response on my part, but I wonder what you'd make of all that.... (cheap shot of tossing the ball back in your court there),

Annette

Erkan Saka sakaerka@gmail.com

December 18th 2014

Thank you sharing this inspiring paper and thank you for the comments afterwards.

Here is my brief intervention.

I was particularly excited - if I understood correctly- a future oriented conceptualization of ethical situations.

The old issue was how anthropologists were always trapped in "after the fact", now we seem to be heading towards "before the fact"

Big data and power of algorithms might be stimulant here. (<http://www.niemanlab.org/2014/12/the-year-we-get-creeped-out-by-algorithms/>)

An immediate concern might be prescriptive - mostly negatively restrictive-powers of future oriented algorithmic powers. Like in the movie "Minority Report" (And an actual implementation seems to have happened in Chicago:

<http://www.theverge.com/2014/2/19/5419854/the-minority-report-this-computer-predicts-crime-but-is-it-racist>)

However, I believe this is an inevitable trend and it is better to consolidate conceptual efforts to offer a scheme of ethics concerning future emergencies. I believe this paper is inspiring in this sense...

Cordially,
Erkan

Veronica Barassi v.barassi@gold.ac.uk

December 20th 2014

Dear All,

This is just a friendly reminder that there are only few days left from the closing of our seminar Producing Ethics (by A. Markham).

Do send in your comments and thoughts.

All the best
Veronica

Elisenda Ardèvol eardevol@uoc.edu

December 20th 2014

Hi, all!

First of all, thanks Annette for sharing her inspiring draft chapter to the list and make us think about the relationship between our academic code ethics in the wider context of ethics "produsage" including people, companies and governments activities. Adam Fish response also goes to the point, especially regarding the implications of a narrow understanding of ethics as only academic norms and regulations.

Thus, ethics is not only about "do not harm your research participants" or "protect your participants privacy", nor is only a matter to keep participants right to informed consent and withdrawal, but also a question of how the researcher is intervening in the world and how the world –and current digital culture developments- is challenging the common grounds of researcher's ethical practices, regulations and believes.

So the "big" questions that the work-in-progress chapter is bringing to the fore are: "What constitutes ethical design of technologies, ethical use of data, and ethical research about people?" How this is being negotiated in different instances? How academics are intervening in ethics production? But as Erkan also pointed out, the chapter's challenge is how to think of a future-oriented ethics-in-practice"?

The ethnographer's ethics has to do primarily with her or his relationship with participants before, during and after fieldwork. The debate in fieldwork ethics has been about how this relationship is being built; In ethnographic research, there are no "subjects" of study but "informants", and later on, participants, correspondents, co-participants or indeed co-authors of the ethnographic research. From this standpoint, a future-oriented ethics-in-practice must be something that relates the researcher with others in a prefigurative way, following Margaret Mead distinction of postfigurative, cfigurative and prefigurative societies.

Mead predicted what a prefigurative society would look like: "In recent years, we have gone from a postfigurative culture, in which the young learn from the old, to a cfigurative culture, in which children and adults learn from their peers. (...) In the future, we will probably live in a prefigurative culture in which the old learn from the young. We must discover prefigurative ways of teaching and learning that will keep the future open, so that children will learn how to learn and discover the value of commitment, rather than be told what to learn or be committed to. In addition, elders will need the experiential knowledge of the young as a basis on which to make plans. The young must be allowed to participate directly and ask the questions; however, there must exist enough trust between generations so that the old will be allowed to work on the answers."

Thus, I imagine a future oriented ethics as a way to intervene in the world to keep the future open. An ethnographer might ask: how my study is contributing to keep the future open?

Citation from:

About anthropologist Margaret Mead and her prediction for the future as regards the world and

culture.

<http://www.trivia-library.com/a/future-predictions-of-famous-anthropologist-margaret-mead.htm>

Elisenda

Veronica Barassi v.barassi@gold.ac.uk

December 23rd 2014

Dear All,

This is just to let you know that the E-Seminar is now closed.

Once again I wanted to thank Annette for her working paper, Adam for his comments, and all the few that at such a busy time of the year have managed to find the time to contribute to the discussion.

I wish you all a fantastic holiday season,

All the best
Veronica

E-Seminar Closed