Rethinking Research Ethics in Digital Times

Community Research Ethics Initiative

Authors:
Joshua Edelman, Avi Astor,
Katarzyna Górak-Sosnowska, and
Johanna Sumiala

March 2026

This is the final report of the Community Ethics Research Initiative. It has been supported by the Economic and Social Research Council grant number ES/Y002903/1. It has been facilitated by University College London, as part of CHANSE ERA-NET Co-fund programme.

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101004509

This report © 2026 Joshua Edelman, Avi Astor, Katarzyna Górak-Sosnowska, and Johanna Sumiala. This publication is licensed under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share-Alike 4.0 International license. It is available to be used, shared, and adapted for non-commercial activity. Please credit the copyright holders as listed above.

https://doi.org/10.23634/MMU.00644077

Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at crei@mmu.ac.uk.

https://chanse.org/community-research-ethics-initiative/

Table of Contents

1. Introduction **5**

1.1 The need 5

1.2 What can go wrong 6

1.3 Our methods 7

1.4 The logics and principles of research ethics 8

A. Care 9
B. Situational and relational 10
C. Processual 10
D. Researchers are responsible 10

1.5 How to use this report 10

2. Transnational Collaboration **11**

2.1 Challenges 11

A. Limitations on research design and implementation 11
B. Complications with the timing and coordination of research and publication 12
C. Difficulties with data sharing and management 12
D. Possibility of 'ethics dumping' 12
E. Potential for exclusion 12

2.2 Recommendations: toward trust, coordination, and support 13

A. Awareness 13
B. Communication 13
C. Coordination 13
D. Collaboration and adaptation 13

3. Vulnerability and sensitivity in research 14

3.1 Challenges 14

A. Procedural ethics vs. ethics in practice 14
B. Vulnerability, autonomy, and consent 15
C. Sensitive topics 16
D. The researcher's positionality 17
E. Data processing challenges 18

3.2 Recommendations 18

A. Bridging procedural and lived ethics 18
B. Informed consent 18
C. Balancing protection and agency 19
D. Participant Validation of findings 19
E. Researcher positionality and support 19
F. Comprehensive ethics training 19

4. Shifting Digital Contexts 20

4.1 Challenges 20

A. Platforms and selection bias 20
B. Consent and data security 21
C. Protecting informants – the trap of digital visibility 21
D. Manipulation of researchers by informants and platforms 21
E. What about AI? 22

4.2 Recommendations 22

A. Awareness comes first 22
B. Processual ethics 22
C. Protecting researchers 23
D. Ethics and the law 23

5. Conclusions 24

Bibliography 25
Acknowledgements 26
About the authors 27

1. Introduction

1.1 The need

This report emerged out of the difficulties we experienced with the ethics processes and procedures that governed our work as researchers in the humanities and social sciences. Like virtually all our colleagues, we aspire to rigorous, ethical, and detailed research that helps address contemporary social challenges. We found that the ethics procedures we were a part of did not always facilitate this, especially when the research involved digital

data, international collaboration, or emotionally sensitive issues such as death and religion, or vulnerably positioned participants. At times, these procedures were simply not fit for purpose.

Therefore, this report addresses those with responsibility for the design and implementation of research ethics procedures. Our goal is to ensure that research ethics across Europe are thorough and effective while still allowing for rich and innovative research that can cross national and disciplinary borders. We are not against research ethics. But our concern is that, if ethics procedures are seen as burdensome or outmoded, researchers and institutions will be tempted to treat them simply as a bureaucratic hurdle and will find ways to work around them. History shows us that unethical research can cause real damage and severely undermine the public credibility and trust essential for academic institutions to maintain their legitimacy in democratic societies.

It is also important to recognize the danger of creating barriers to conducting research that are so onerous that ethical, rigorous, and comparative academic research becomes unfeasible or inordinately expensive. Advances in digital technology, deepening polarisation, and global instability present major challenges that require careful and diligent research. If academic researchers are not able to provide this, other actors will step in to fill the void. These may be commercial actors such as social media companies who have access to vast swaths of data, have a financial interest in its exploitation, and are not in any sense bound by the norms or structures of the academy. If this happens, that which takes the place of academic research will be less useful, more biased, error-prone, and ethically dangerous. In the era of digital society, it is important that academic researchers can make use of big data in safe, effective, and productive ways without abandoning the ethics that characterise their profession.

Democracy and diversity are twin strengths of European societies, and this is reflected in their academic structures. This means that no single ethics procedure will work in every context. We are not suggesting the creation of one. Instead, our goal is to suggest a set of principles that different counties and institutions can implement

in ways that work for them. Though these implementations will be different, all should have the same goal of encouraging rigorous and innovative research that serves the public with both credibility and insight.

1.2 What can go wrong

This project grew, rhizomatically, out of three international research projects which took place between 2022 and 2025 under the aegis of the Collaboration of Humanities and Social Sciences in Europe (CHANSE), a part of the EU's Horizon Europe scheme. These three projects all crossed international and disciplinary boundaries, and all faced frustrations in navigating ethics procedures. Our three projects each dealt with sensitive issues of religious identity and practice, grief, and ritual participation, and made use of ethnographic methods. While these commonalities initially shaped the sorts of challenges we faced, in our conversations with other CHANSE colleagues, our discussions with research participants, and our review of existing literature, we found that our experiences echo a wide set of current struggles that humanities and social science scholars have with research ethics processes. To be sure, individual experiences varied widely, and some ethics procedures were seen as more effective than others. Nevertheless, we did notice common themes in the sorts of problems that were being reported. Specifically, ethics procedures were criticised along the following lines:

- They place researchers in an awkward position with respect to the participants they work with, as they cannot freely negotiate an ethical arrangement that best serves participants' needs.
- They are based on terms and norms from the natural sciences and medicine and thus treat research participants as more-or-less interchangeable bodies rather than as people in a specific cultural and social context.
- Different institutions' research ethics procedures are not compatible with one another, even in terms of their interpretation of common frameworks such as GDPR. This is especially a problem for institutions in different countries willing to collaborate.
- Thus, they severely limit researchers' ability to collaborate with their colleagues in other countries, making comparative research more difficult.
- Their meaning and purpose are unclear, and researchers approach them as an administrative task, not a moral one.
- They impose twin requirements of making data anonymous and sharing it in open access repositories which can be nearly impossible to reconcile for social sciences and humanities data that comes from interviews and discussions with marginalised communities.
- They fail to consider the nature of online data, which is not clearly public or private, and do not adequately address the possible harms that can come from sharing elements of data that can be easily searched.

These problems can lead to the following consequences:

- They make relationships between researchers and participants more difficult, not easier, as they make ethics a matter of impersonal procedures rather than relationships of trust that researchers build with participants, sometimes over years.
- Research ethics procedures can be seen as tick-box exercises rather than opportunities

for genuine ethical reflection. This also subtly encourages researchers to ignore or circumvent the ethics process, as they seem to be of little use to them.

- They make research slower, more expensive and more dispiriting. This discourages researchers, especially those earlier in their careers. When early career researchers become frustrated with the research process, we lose the next generation of leading researchers.
- They put academic researchers at a disadvantage compared to commercial actors, who are unconstrained by these processes. While the information they create may not be as rigorous, reliable, or ethical as proper academic research, the ease of its generation allows it to influence public policy and discourse more quicky than proper research can.
- Even within the academy, they encourage researchers to lower their research aims and pursue projects that are less comprehensive, less comparative, and less engaged with living human beings than would otherwise be the case.

1.3 Our methods

This report is the outcome of a set of discussions and reflections by the four authors, building on the following sources:

A. A review of existing literature on research ethics, especially literature focused on the following interrelated topics:

   ii. Culturally sensitive issues, such as religion, research participants in vulnerable positions, death, and so on.

   iii. Qualitative research in the social science and humanities, especially focus groups, interviews, and ethnographic observation of communities, including minoritised ones.

   iv. Digital research questions, such as the use of online data, anonymity in online interaction, digital publication and data storage, and open access to data sets and results.

   v. A focus on European research, especially in the context of EU funding and regulation.

This review was necessarily limited by the time and resources allocated to this project. While we have listed many of the sources we consulted in the bibliography of this report, many are not quoted directly in an effort to keep the report short, clear, and easy to read.

B. Discussions with our fellow researchers across the network of CHANSE projects. This took place informally, especially with our colleagues on the projects on which we worked, and more formally, through an online survey and a pair of workshops involving all CHANSE researchers in September 2025 in Krakow.

C. A set of focus groups that we ran with research participants and research ethics professionals across Europe. Our research participants were drawn from our and other CHANSE-funded projects. We asked them about their experience of research, their expectations in terms of how they would be treated and what would happen to their data, what reassured or concerned them, and how they thought research ethics should be run. Participating research ethics professionals were drawn from universities, funding, and regulatory bodies across Europe. They discussed their experience of

research ethics processes, their underlying purposes, and the challenges they faced in implementing them.

In bringing these sources together, we made extensive use of our own practical experience of navigating research ethics as European researchers over the course of our careers. Our focus in this report is on the practical challenges of ethics procedures on the ground, and so our methods reflect this focus.

1.4 The logics and principles of research ethics

While the concerns we found were related to the procedures and restrictions to which researchers were obligated to adhere, they often point to broader questions regarding the general aims of research ethics procedures and their underlying logics. Research ethics, like all ethics, are contested. European research structures do not show universal agreement about the purpose of ethics or the logics by which they are carried out, and our focus groups, interviews and research showed that this diversity was reflected among researchers, research professionals, and research participants as well.

This diversity of logics is not always as visible as the diversity of structures, even though they are entwined. We have observed the following five logics at work behind research ethics structures:

- An aversion to institutional risk. Universities are conscious of the risks inherent in the work they do, and wish to assess those risks, understand them, and reduce them where possible. This is the logic behind risk assessments of many kinds, including those of health and safety, reputation, employment, and other financial obligations. Research presents risks that need to be mitigated, whether in a legal, financial, reputational, or moral sense.

- An avoidance of harm to research participants. This logic is strongly linked to past abuses, especially in medical research This logic comes from an awareness that research can cause potential harm to participants. Historically, these harms have been inflicted largely on those whose social status makes them vulnerable and unable to refuse participation. This is the logic behind informed consent: participants should have a right to know the potential harms that their participation may entail and need to explicitly consent to participation without unreasonable inducements, deceit, or other factors that may affect that consent. The harms contemplated by this logic are not just physical but cultural and emotional as well, and this logic thus pays attention to risks to a participant's social or cultural status, self-understanding, wellbeing, or autonomy.

- Protection of research integrity. This way of thinking about ethics notes how certain practices can create bias or unreliability in the collection and interpretation of data, which could undermine the accuracy, rigour, or intellectual value of the resulting research. This logic sees ethics processes

as a means of protecting research from these pitfalls. While relatively rare, it was present in conjunction with other logics.

- A bureaucratic requirement. Some research ethics processes seem to claim no logic for themselves aside from being a requirement of others, such as regulators or funders. While not common, we have seen situations in which this is the only logic researchers see in the ethics procedures with which they engage. Of course, this reduction of ethics to procedural compliance empties ethics of substantive moral principles or values.

- A social benefit. Some ethics procedures also paid attention to the social benefit that research offers, often as a means of balancing its accompanying risks. We observed ethics procedures that considered not only the reduction of harm, but the promotion of social good in their suggestion of how research ought to operate. These procedures asked how the benefit of research to its participants and wider society could be encouraged. Sometimes, this was framed as not just as a means of balancing risks but as a goal to pursue in and of itself.

These ways of working through research ethics, many of which we saw in parallel in the same research process, were not themselves articulations of the values that research ethics aimed to serve. Some implied certain values, but they did not specify forms of risk, harm, integrity, or benefit. A useful understanding of research ethics requires both logics and values.

Research is a social practice, one deeply entangled with power, identity, historical inequality, autonomy, purpose, and morality that parallel those of other social practices. It does not operate in a different ethical universe than that of the rest of our lives. Articulating what those values should be is the realm of ethics properly conceived; it is not a task that this report can or should do on behalf of any of us. Frankly, these were not debates that greatly concerned many of our informants. While there were questions at the margins, for the most part, the people we spoke with agreed on the broad ethical values that should guide research.

However, the specific challenge came from the application of these values to the distinct processes and goal of research, namely, the creation of new knowledge that is rigorous, relevant, and systematic. When we speak of the principles of research ethics in this report, we are referring to the application of a broader ethical framework to the specifics of research, especially in the humanities and social sciences in contemporary Europe. This, too, is generally how colleagues understand the term.

Therefore, based on our experience, our research, our conversations, and our thinking, we propose the following as key principles that research ethics should guarantee. We articulate them tentatively here, but we hope they are also legible in the analyses and recommendations in later chapters of this report. They follow one from the other.

A. Care

We suggest an ethics that is based on the need to care for others, whether those others are our research participants, members of the general public, ourselves and our colleagues, or the planet on which we live. A key part of care is the need for honest and open dialogue between all parties, and operating on a spirit of mutuality, where the interests of researchers, their subjects and the wider public should be aligned as much as possible, rather than placed in competition with each other.

B. Situational and relational

Because care cannot be generalised, ethics should be based on the particular situations and relationships within the process of research, including data gathering, analysis, and publication. This means that ethics cannot be reduced to a one-size-fits-all set of regulations that apply in every context; they must be adaptive and responsive to the details of each piece of research.

C. Processual

This means that there is a fundamental problem if ethics approval is given at the beginning of a project and never reviewed or updated thereafter. Certainly, experienced researchers may be able to anticipate the methods and relationships that a piece of research will entail, but even in these situations, research participants may have unexpected views or needs, methodological challenges can arise, and new political or social situations can develop. Therefore, it is impossible in principle for ethics to be an issue which is definitively addressed before a project begins – or, indeed, before it concludes. Ethics therefore needs to be an ongoing process, not a matter of gatekeeping. This does not mean that ethical approval cannot or should not be sought in advance, but processes must make space in which to respond to new situations that emerge during research. It also means that ethical rules cannot ever wholly be set in advance. Any fixed rule will necessarily be fallible, at least in theory; if the goal of research is to create knowledge that is genuinely new, then all of the ethical challenges that such research will encounter cannot, by definition, be known or addressed in advance. This may be difficult, but ethics procedures need to be sufficiently flexible.

D. Researchers are responsible

The only individuals who can be expected to take overall ethical responsibility for the process of research are the researchers themselves. In our research, we have spoken with many exceptionally talented ethics professionals, and their input thinking through the ethics of research is clearly of exceptional value. Different national research ethics systems build different relationships between ethics professionals and

researchers. However, if research ethics are as we have outlined them here, they cannot be meaningfully separated from those conducting the research. Ethics cannot be farmed out or delegated away. Each researcher, individually and collectively, is responsible for the ethics of the work they do. Ethics professionals can provide valuable advice and can organise useful procedures, external companies may provide useful tools, and PIs may have an oversight responsibility over members of their team, but none of this can move the fundamental ethical responsibilities for research from the individual scholars who undertake that work. This is a responsibility of awareness and action which is an ongoing part of every researcher's job.

1.5 How to use this report

This report is arranged in three chapters, each of which addresses a set of concerns around research ethics: transnational collaboration, sensitivity and vulnerability, and the shifting contexts of the digital. The three overlap, of course, but each lays out particular concerns that have been raised and proposes a set of recommendations to address them.

Neither the recommendations we offer here – or any others, for that matter – could solve the problems we have identified here. What we are offering here is not so much a direct plan that can be followed, but a set of guidelines that those in charge of research ethics procedures can use to help think through how to solve them themselves. As we will discuss in the first chapter, differences between research ethics procedures, institutions and countries are inevitable; what is required is not uniformity but a mutual understanding of principles and

challenges that can lead to as much compatibility as possible.

This means that this report cannot be used as a straightforward manual on how to create appropriate research ethics procedures. Instead, our intention is that those who shape research ethics procedures will recognize the challenges we describe and take up the work of designing their systems to address them. Our recommendations will require interpretation, judgement, and flexibility to be implemented.

2. Transnational Collaboration

Ethical review protocols and procedures for academic research vary across national contexts for many reasons, including differences in institutional cultures and traditions, differing degrees of litigiousness, distinct historical experiences with notorious cases of ethical abuse in scientific research, and different levels of resources dedicated to the process of ethical review. Ethics protocols affect all aspects of the research process, from planning and design to execution, data management, and dissemination. Therefore, asymmetries in ethical review between countries and institutions may influence how research partnerships are chosen and cultivated, and ultimately, how effective and smoothly they operate. This section deals with the complications such asymmetries pose for comparative research that crosses national boundaries.

2.1 Challenges

A. Limitations on research design and implementation

Asymmetries in ethical review protocols may limit the extent to which partnering research institutions can each carry out a given project's activities. In some cases, researchers from some countries or institutions may be forced to refrain from participating in specific work packages due to a particular requirement or inflexibility of the ethics protocols that regulate their work, even if the exact same work can be carried out ethically elsewhere. To avoid these situations, researchers may abandon potentially fruitful lines of research or fail to consider them in the first place. This may happen even if, ultimately, these procedural challenges can be overcome; the threat of the problem may be enough to discourage researchers from engaging with partners governed by 'difficult' research ethics protocols at the onset. Uncertainty about what

research is likely to be approved or denied by ethics committees may lead to adaptions in research design that yield lower quality research

B. Complications with the timing and coordination of research and publication

Asymmetric ethics review procedures make it difficult to synchronize the timing of research activities. Teams whose proposals undergo quicker ethics review procedures may embark on their research earlier than teams that must deal with slower ethics review procedures. While this may not present problems for social scientific research on practices in highly controlled environments, it may indeed influence the results of projects which are time-sensitive: where behaviours, attitudes, and interpretations are shaped by specific global, national, or local events or take place in a time-limited context. Prolonged ethical review procedures also decrease the chances of publishing research findings within the limited timeframes of collaborative projects, resulting in lower evaluations and more difficulty attaining future funding.

C. Difficulties with data sharing and management

Once data is gathered, discrepancies in restrictions on data sharing specified by different ethical review committees may generate confusion about what personal data can be shared, as well as how to share or access it. Limitations imposed on data collected for collaborative projects – or even uncertainty about whether or not such limitations exist – may

constitute a major impediment to collaborative analysis and publication.

D. Possibility of 'ethics dumping'

In extreme cases, asymmetric ethics protocols may lead to pernicious moral outcomes, such as 'ethics dumping,' or the conduct of risky research in resource-poor settings that would be considered unethical in resource-rich settings (Schroeder et al. 2019). This is most common in the context of collaborations that traverse the Global North and South. However, it may also occur in the context of collaborative research within Europe, given the material disparities and distinctive ethics protocols present across the continent.

E. Potential for exclusion

Certain countries may come to be excluded from collaborative endeavours if their ethics protocols are perceived as either overly demanding or rigid, on the one hand, or overly lenient and lacking rigor, on the other. International collaboration between EU and non-EU countries can be especially difficult due to the absence of institutional recognition and trust. In some instances, this appears rather arbitrary, as in the case of the (lack of) recognition of UK ethics procedures post-Brexit. Ethical review, like scientific research, should be approached with rigor and systematicity, and should not be subject to political influences or trends. If research collaborations are shaped by compatibilities in ethics protocols rather than rigorous criteria for scientific comparison, this could stifle promising international collaboration and impede the generation of robust comparative data.

2.2 Recommendations: toward trust, coordination, and support

It is neither realistic nor wise to ask that ethics protocols and procedures be entirely uniform across the continent. We recognize the need for contextual specificity, as well as how ethics protocols and procedures are inevitably shaped by disparities in resources, personnel, and institutional development and experience. Nevertheless, uniformity is advisable for specific elements of ethical protocols that relate specifically to collaboration, such as GDPR, to

facilitate data sharing and management. This report endeavours to identify areas where common frameworks could be developed and implemented.

A. Awareness

Part of the responsibility for coordinating ethics protocols clearly lies with researchers during the planning phases of their collaborative projects. But the international landscape is complex, and thus research ethics professionals should develop an awareness of international differences between ethics procedures. This should include of both differences and commonalities, and an understanding of where common rules, such as GDPR, are subjected to markedly different interpretations. As it may not be practical for every university to have this awareness, it may be necessary to gather it in a central place.

B. Communication

In order to promote compatibility in ethics procedures for international projects, greater communication is needed between ethical review boards and commissions across borders. Given the ease of digital communication, it is more feasible for ethical review procedures to be coordinated jointly by multiple academic institutions that host participating researchers. This communication can help to avoid misunderstandings and, most importantly, to build trust in ethics procedures in other national contexts.

C. Coordination

European academic institutions and funding agenwcies can help the process of coordinating protocols and review procedures. Part of the challenge lies in building trust across institutions and national borders. Trust for sound ethical review must be developed between academic institutions in countries with a more developed infrastructure for ethical review and those in countries with less developed ones. To an extent, this already exists, as ethical approval is recognized across borders within the European Union by many academic institutions. However, this is not always the case. A measure of flexibility is essential for evading roadblocks to research that result from asymmetrical ethical protocols and procedures, and institutions should avoid reduplicating review processes if unnecessary. If this is not possible, the timeline of the lead institution should direct the timeline of other partnering institutions.

D. Collaboration and adaptation

All collaborative research requires methodological flexibility, and this should also be the case for research ethics protocols. Mirroring collaborative research with collaborative ethical review could be beneficial for both researchers and research participants or subjects. Should this be implemented, it is of course important to avoid bureaucratic bottlenecks. However, collaboration in ethical review and the pressure that comes from meeting partner country deadlines could lead to greater efficiency in the review process.

In the social sciences, ethical review procedures must also be adapted in accordance with the risks presented by the research. When it comes to collaborative research, the timing and conduct of research are extremely difficult to coordinate if one institution follows ethical review protocols modelled on clinical research protocols while others follow protocols tailored to the social sciences. The danger with overly rigid protocols modelled on clinic research is that they become viewed as a bureaucratic hurdle to be strategically navigated, even if this involves being less than fully truthful during the review process, as the requirements are viewed as unreasonable and unnecessary. Ethical protocols adapted adequately to social scientific

research and to the specific projects applying for approval, by contrast, are more likely to be viewed as credible and useful for researchers seeking to ensure the ethical soundness of their research.

3. Vulnerability and sensitivity in research

Vulnerability and sensitivity are key concepts that must be considered when designing social research. They attract considerable attention due to the necessity of ensuring the protection and respect of participants' rights. Both concepts, however, have fluid boundaries and lack clear, universally accepted definitions, as their meaning and relevance are highly dependent on the specific research context and implementation. Moreover, in some languages, these terms do not have direct or adequate equivalents, which adds to the complexity of their interpretation. Thus, while they are crucial for maintaining ethical coherence in research practice, their conceptual ambiguity makes them difficult to operationalize and analyse.

In this section, we examine how these two concepts – vulnerability and sensitivity – operate within social research contexts. We also explore how researchers can recognize and respond to existing vulnerabilities and sensitivities, as well as how research processes themselves may contribute to their creation, reinforcement, or mitigation.

3.1. Challenges

A. Procedural ethics vs. ethics in practice

When researchers embark on a study, they first encounter procedural ethics – the formal, institutionalized dimension of research ethics. This form of ethics derives from university or institutional regulations that require submitting an application to an ethics committee, completing various forms, and detailing aspects such as research aims, data collection methods, and instruments used. On a practical level, this process ensures compliance with institutional

requirements and serves as a protective mechanism for both the researcher and the institution in case of potential ethical breaches. Many researchers therefore approach the ethics review primarily as a formal obligation or bureaucratic step, necessary for securing grants or publication approval. As focus group discussions among ethics committee members reveal, ethics approval is sometimes perceived instrumentally, and comments from ethics committees may be received with impatience rather than as constructive guidance.

Ethics committees generally possess the appropriate expertise, procedural competence, and understanding of higher-level legal frameworks. However, they may lack familiarity with the specific contexts or cultural nuances of certain research topics. As a result, proposals addressing sensitive or controversial issues can raise concerns or trigger cautionary responses from committees, which may recommend avoiding such topics altogether. These decisions sometimes reflect institutional risk aversion and not necessarily a substantive ethical assessment of the research's value or conduct, or the actual risks that those marked as vulnerable may face on the ground.

While procedural ethics focuses on formal approval, researchers also navigate ethics in practice – the ethical dilemmas and relational complexities that arise in the field. Once research begins, interactions with participants unfold in unpredictable ways that cannot be fully anticipated at the stage of ethics review. This lived form of ethics – sometimes referred to as ethics in situ – is shaped by context, relationships, and interpersonal dynamics that evolve during data collection. This is particularly evident in ethnographic studies, where rigid ethical prescriptions often fail to capture the fluidity and contingency of real-world research encounters. Here, vulnerability and sensitivity do not always take the form of pre-existing categories of people or topics, but particular relationships of power that are constantly being shaped and re-shaped.

This divergence illustrates a broader tension between procedural and lived ethics. In an ideal scenario, both should align: institutional ethical frameworks would effectively support ethical awareness in practice, and field-level experiences would, in turn, inform institutional procedures. In reality, researchers often operate between two distinct ethical worlds – the procedural one, based on fulfilling documented requirements, and the lived one, grounded in the actual moral and relational dimensions of fieldwork. The challenge lies in bridging these two domains to ensure that both participants' and researchers' rights, wellbeing, and agency are genuinely respected.

Furthermore, the external sociopolitical context can intensify these tensions. When researchers engage with sensitive topics – such as migration, religion, or discrimination – their work may attract public scrutiny or political backlash. In such cases, both procedural and lived ethics become crucial: institutional approval protects formal compliance, while ethical reflexivity in practice safeguards against harm, misrepresentation, or stigmatization.

B. Vulnerability, autonomy, and consent

Addressing vulnerability within research is challenging precisely because it is a contextual and relational phenomenon. It does not exist independently but emerges in specific social, political, and institutional settings. Researchers often approach groups they identify as 'vulnerable' with good intentions, seeking to protect, support, or safeguard them. Yet such protection can easily turn paternalistic, positioning participants as lacking agency and assuming the researcher knows best. When vulnerability is framed in this way, it risks undermining participants' autonomy and

reproducing the very hierarchies it aims to mitigate.

This dilemma becomes particularly visible when participants willingly share personal or sensitive information without always realizing the potential consequences. Here researchers face a difficult ethical question: should they act as guardians, protecting participants from themselves, by withholding or not recording certain data, even when disclosure is voluntary? Overprotection can safeguard institutional ethics but simultaneously diminish participants' voice and self-determination.

A related issue concerns the consent process. Ethical approval usually requires standardized consent forms written in formal legal language. While such documents protect institutions and researchers, they may be inaccessible to certain group, too complex for some to understand or treated as documents to be signed automatically without reflection by others. This may ensure procedural compliance but is not in fact an appropriate means of establishing informed consent.

The question of consent becomes even more complex in research involving minors. Ethical debates often focus on whether parental consent alone is sufficient or whether children and adolescents should also provide assent in age-appropriate ways. Additional dilemmas arise when young people wish to participate in studies on sensitive topics such as sexual orientation or identity, but cannot or do not wish to involve their parents. Should researchers exclude these youths because legal guardians refuse consent, even if participation could give voice to seldom-heard experiences? Balancing legal obligations with respect for participant autonomy poses another ethical challenge.

Similarly, some communities might be culturally unfamiliar with, or suspicious of, written agreements. In such contexts, a signed consent form may evoke distrust or even fear, particularly where written documentation is associated with surveillance or bureaucracy. For these groups, oral consent grounded in mutual trust may be more meaningful and appropriate. Yet such practices can appear questionable from an institutional standpoint, raising concerns about adequate protection of participants' rights and research transparency. Overemphasis on formal procedures may thus exclude precisely those communities whose perspectives are underrepresented in scholarship.

These examples reveal a broader paradox: in seeking to protect 'vulnerable' individuals, researchers and institutions may inadvertently silence them. Excessive ethical caution, though well-intentioned, can limit inclusion and suppress voices outside of the mainstream. Ethical engagement with vulnerability therefore requires reflexivity, procedural flexibility, contextual understanding, and a commitment to balancing protection with empowerment.

C. Sensitive topics

One of the key aims of social research is to give voice and agency to the people and communities being studied. Yet this principle

raises a difficult question: should all groups be given the same visibility? The dilemma emerges most clearly when researchers engage with groups whose views or actions may be considered socially harmful, extremist, or exclusionary. Providing visibility to such actors risks amplifying positions that undermine democratic or ethical values. At the same time, excluding them from analysis may obscure important insights into how power, ideology, or grievance operate within society. Ethical research must therefore navigate the tension between representation and responsibility, acknowledging even disturbing perspectives without normalizing or legitimizing them.

Sensitivity also arises when studying practices that are ethically contentious or legally prohibited. Similarly, obtaining formal consent may be unrealistic in contexts where written agreements arouse suspicion or legal risk. Here, ethical structures and epistemic access come into conflict, forcing researchers to adapt ethics procedures to the realities on the ground without compromising ethical principles.

A further issue concerns 'canonization' – i.e. following established paths of what should be studied and how with which disciplines and funders are familiar and comfortable. Some communities are repeatedly studied through narrow thematic frames which reproduce fixed associations between identities and social problems. These frameworks are often reinforced by publication incentives or funding priorities. Researchers must therefore ask whether to conform to these established frames or to resist them by presenting alternative narratives. Breaking out of such frames may better reflect the diversity and agency of the studied communities, but doing so requires careful ethical judgment to avoid replacing one form of misrepresentation with another.

D. The researcher's positionality

An often-overlooked dimension of ethics, vulnerability, and sensitivity concerns researchers themselves. Researchers themselves may become vulnerable or exposed to stigmatization, whether due to the nature of their relationship with participants, the topic they investigate, or the personal stance they take toward that topic. Authorship cannot be cleanly separated from the author; the ethical position of the researcher is inevitably inscribed in the research process and its outcomes.

Researcher vulnerability can arise in a number of ways. Entering unfamiliar field settings, engaging with unpredictable participants, or conducting interviews in a non-native language can generate uncertainty and emotional strain. Studying sensitive topics can also confront researchers with situations in which they witness suffering but cannot meaningfully intervene. Such experiences may lead to frustration or a sense of helplessness. While participants are often seen as the more vulnerable party, researchers may also experience ethical unease when they hold extensive knowledge about others yet do not reciprocate it themselves.

When dealing with politically or ideologically sensitive topics, researchers may also face external pressures that challenge their autonomy or integrity. Social or institutional forces can discourage inquiry into controversial subjects, leading to self-censorship or direct interference. A researcher's religious, ethnic, political or gender identity may become grounds for delegitimization by peers, stakeholders, or the public. For example, a researcher of one faith studying the religious practices of another community may be deemed inappropriate or biased, irrespective of methodological rigor. Likewise, neutrality in a polarized political context can be misread as complicity, potentially resulting in reputational harm, online harassment, or the suppression of research findings. These forms of cancelling or silencing

demonstrate that vulnerability is relational and extends in multiple directions.

E. Data processing challenges

Researchers may, either knowingly or inadvertently, expose participants to harm through the ways in which research data are processed and managed. Three key issues are particularly relevant in this context: anonymization, the use of artificial intelligence in data processing, and the treatment of archival data. A rather common misconception is that anonymizing research data simply means removing participants' names. In small or highly specific populations, however, this approach is often insufficient. Even when overt identifiers are omitted, combinations of demographic details, workplace information, quoted statements, or contextual descriptions may allow for indirect re-identification. The result is that seemingly 'anonymous' participants can be easily inferred by those familiar with the field or community under study. This may place them at risk.

Another often-overlooked issue concerns the ethical use of archival materials. When researchers access historical archives, there is an implicit assumption that archivists or data custodians act as gatekeepers who determine what can be safely shared. Yet this assumption does not eliminate ethical responsibility on the part of researchers. Even when dealing with data about deceased individuals or long-past events, questions persist about the boundaries of respect for persons, privacy, and representation.

Working with data about minoritised or Indigenous peoples also raises specific ethical and political questions that go beyond generic concerns about vulnerability or sensitivity. Indigenous Data Sovereignty asserts that Indigenous peoples hold inherent rights and interests in data about their peoples, territories, and ways of life. Such data include individual-level administrative or survey information, as well as collective knowledge about lands, resources, languages, cultural practices, and ancestral histories. In this context vulnerability is structural and collective. Processing such data ethically requires a relational approach in which Indigenous peoples exercise genuine control over how data about them are collected, linked, interpreted, and mobilized, and in which research outputs contribute to their own priorities and not just to academic research.

3.2 Recommendations

A. Bridging procedural and lived ethics

Ethics applications should go beyond compliance with procedures to anticipate the dilemmas that researchers may face in the field. Ideally, ethics should outline decision-making principles or procedures for emergent situations. Ethics committees can minimize the procedural-lived ethics gap through innovative support structures, such as mentoring programs or dedicated supervision for researchers tackling sensitive topics or vulnerable populations. Pairing fieldworkers with an ethics committee liaison who is knowledgeable about the project's specificities would provide ongoing guidance to optimize research quality while safeguarding participants' and researchers' interests.

B. Informed consent

Research ethics should prioritize comprehension over signatures by redesigning consent as a dialogic process: employ plain-language summaries, oral explanations, back-translation for linguistic minorities, comprehension checks and other techniques to make sure that informed consent is genuine, not just documented. For communities distrustful of written agreements, implement layered consent (verbal agreement documented via fieldnotes, audio statements, or witnesses) and justify these as culturally

appropriate to ethics committees. With minors, distinguish parental consent from child assent, creating age-appropriate mechanisms for adolescents to signal agreement or dissent – particularly for topics they cannot safely discuss with guardians.

C. Balancing protection and agency

Ethics procedures should adopt the principle of 'as many protections as necessary, as few as possible' to prevent overprotection that silences participants or prevents the study of difficult experiences.

For instances of over-disclosure, employ graduated strategies: pause the interview, revisit consent, discuss potential risks openly, and offer options to restrict or withdraw specific material at a later stage. In analysis and writing, foreground participants' own interpretive frames and agency.

D. Participant validation of findings

For small, tightly-knit communities where anonymization risks re-identification, share draft results and representations with affected participants or community representatives. This member-checking process allows them to verify whether descriptions inadvertently demask them or misrepresent their intentions. While the researcher must retain interpretive authority over final conclusions, this step builds trust and ensures contextual fidelity. Ethical influence over conclusions remains a separate, complex question warranting further debate. Moreover, when engaging stigmatized or at-risk communities, researchers should actively consult participants on their preferred terminology and framing. This practice empowers individuals, respects their self-identification, and counters dehumanizing labels imposed from outside.

E. Researcher positionality and support

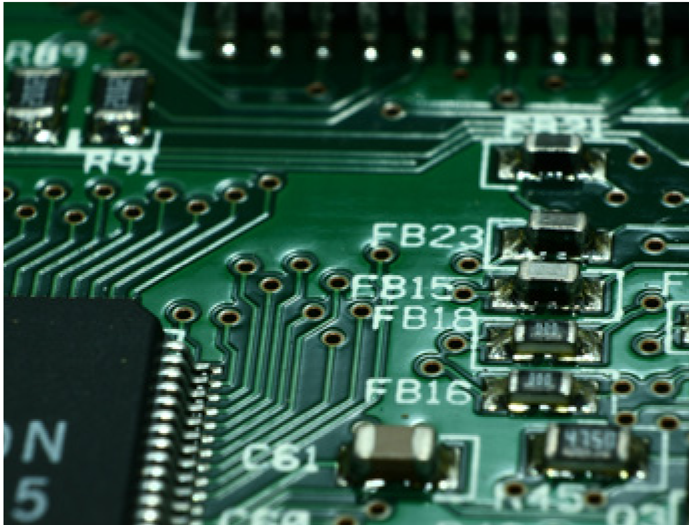
Researcher positionality should be explicitly addressed both in methodologies and ethics procedures, particularly for early-career scholars and sensitive topics. Ethics procedures should take account of the fact that researchers themselves may experience vulnerability in unfamiliar contexts, emotional strain, or external backlash. Structured reflexivity should be institutionalised through positionality statements, ethics-focused supervision, and peer debriefing to help researchers recognize how their identities, stances, and emotions shape fieldwork and analysis. Researcher and participant vulnerabilities should be seen as relational.

F. Comprehensive ethics training

Ethics training should not just cover regulatory formalities, but also key issues such as vulnerability, stigma, researcher safety, and representational politics through concrete, case-based discussions. Such training equips researchers with reflexive judgment for navigating contextual dilemmas rather than promoting rote compliance. Anyone could benefit from such trainings, but they could be particularly useful for young scholars entering the challenging field of social research.

4. Shifting Digital Contexts

“Digital technology is not good or bad, but it is not neutral either,” argue Veikka Lahtinen and Pontus Purokuru (2024, 9) in their book titled What is wrong with Internet? (English translation). The same applies to the question of research ethics in digital contexts. While the



internet, digital platforms and social media have provided many new possibilities for scholars to expand their research and afforded novel methods to gather and analyse data, they have also led to new and profound ethical concerns. Following Lahtinen and Purokuru, as a research context the digital is anything but neutral. This section addresses some critical challenges that typically emerge as researchers work in digital contexts and suggests some recommendations to meet these challenges in ethically sensitive and sustainable ways.

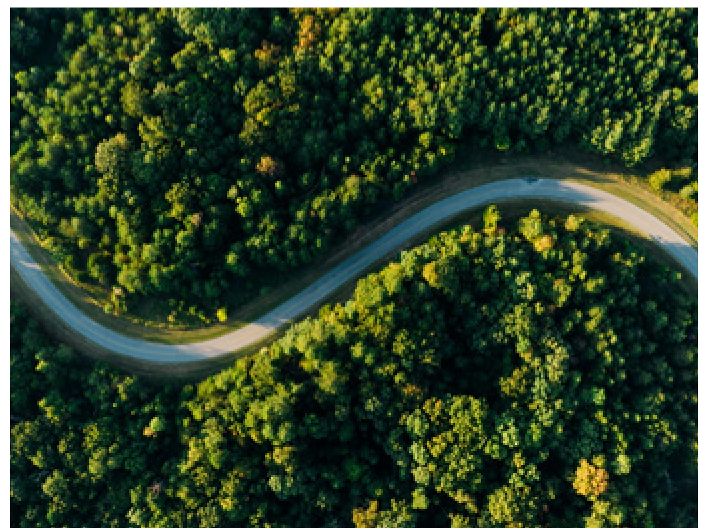
4.1. Challenges

A. Platforms and selection bias

A core ethical concern has to do with the selection of digital platforms as contexts and frameworks for research, which can lead to structural asymmetries between research communities and institutions. This issue can be addressed at least in two different, yet interconnected contexts.

Firstly, today, researchers typically use digital platforms to gather and share information within research project teams. However, the more international the project, the more complicated issues typically emerge in relation to the availability, usability and accessibility of those platforms. Some platforms cannot be used in certain countries because of regulatory or legal limitations. For financial reasons, other countries do not have accesses to the same commercial datasets and academic resources that are standard elsewhere. Researchers need to consider principles of equality and acknowledge that the choice of platforms may mean that not all members have equal access to shared information. Such ethical concerns must be discussed in the frameworks of university hierarchies and related policies of regulation.

Secondly, researchers whose work examines subjects or topics with a great deal of currency in the digital world may need to operate on or alongside commercial platforms owned by corporations including Alphabet (owner of Google) and Meta. Such global tech giants are paradigmatic examples of data and platform capitalism in action. Their business models are



based on collection and further processing of user data. This business logic is anything but ethically neutral or methodologically transparent, and thus the use of these companies' platforms can lead to biases or risks that researchers must consider. Scholars should reflect on what kind of data is or can be available on those platforms, who has access to it, and what kind of traces their own use of these leaves. All these questions require ethical consideration of potential harms to participants, researchers, and others. The elimination of these risks may not be wholly possible, and the goal should not be ethical purity. But ethics does call for a rational consideration of these risks and methods for minimising them.

B. Consent and data security

The collection of online data can be difficult to fit within established ethics procedures. Scholars report difficulties in sending and/or receiving informed consent from research subjects, whose identities may only be known to researchers through usernames and/or tags. Building trust through online networks between researchers and research participants can prove to be a complex matter.

Another, related matter has to do with issues concerning how to protect data security and research subjects' anonymity and privacy when stored digitally. How and where to store digital data so it cannot be easily hacked and/or instrumentalized to put in service of the platforms' data capitalism is not straightforward. A further ethical concern has to do with what type of empirical material can eventually be published as research outcomes. In the world of search engines, the fabrication of minor details that in themselves would be inconsequential to protect research participants' privacy has become a contested but common practice. If not fabricated, such traces can be relatively easily tracked back to research participants, consequently compromising their identity.

C. Protecting informants - the trap of digital visibility

While protecting informants from harm is an important ethical principle, research in digital contexts adds an additional challenge particular to online communication. We may call it the 'trap of digital visibility'. Every post our informants make leaves digital traces and can have a life of its own. The very act of studying people and their communication and interactions in digital contexts can make their actions more visible

and the subject of algorithmic attention. Such visibility may have unexpected consequences for informants, and it is hard, if not impossible, for a researcher to control this, no matter their intentions. This is particularly relevant when studying sensitive topics that can put research participants into potentially vulnerable positions and under risk. And yet, researchers can also occasionally find themselves in situations where they must consider whether it would be ethical to try to protect research subjects from themselves. In the minds of social media users, the line between public and private information is often quite blurred.

D. Manipulation of researchers by informants and platforms

Research participants are not the only party that may face risk when research is carried out in digital contexts. Scholars also face harm in researching not only sensitive but also contested topics in digital contexts. Researchers can be deceived by their informants, who may have hidden agendas for participating in research. Researchers face attempts of manipulation, which again may result in selection bias and bring about questions related to the representativeness of the data. In this context, ethics and the need to protect researchers cannot be separated from the principles of reliability and validity of research. Today, the

digital realm is also occupied by different types of populist and anti-institutional forces, and it is not uncommon for research outcomes to be hijacked and used in counterproductive ways (from a research community point of view) to challenge, undermine or ridicule research and the academic institutions that produce or fund it. This misuse of research can undermine public confidence in both the social value of research and of the integrity and independence of researchers themselves. Ethics procedures need to address the risks of reputational harm and harassment that researchers face from such misuse.

E. What about AI?

In recent years rapid development of AI and related tools have further complicated research procedures on ethics in digital contexts. Even the ability to distinguish between human and synthetic agency is anything but trivial. For example, in the case of identifying informants in the digital contexts, it is not always easy to know whether those informants 'really' exist as human

beings or are in fact bots, sockpuppets, or trolls hiding behind human-seeming profiles.

Furthermore, with the growing integration of AI tools into digital research workflows, uploading interview transcripts or field notes to cloud-based platforms for automated transcription, coding, or analysis can inadvertently expose sensitive information to external systems whose policies on data use and protection remain opaque. While AI tools can significantly streamline research processes, they may also obscure where and how information is stored, processed, or reused. This raises critical questions about the adequacy of anonymization, the researcher's responsibility for data stewardship, and the extent to which participant consent accounts for such secondary or automated uses of data.

In this rapidly shifting context, researchers must also ethically consider the ethics of AI systems themselves. What digital data does a given AI tool draw on, where and how was that data gathered, and what kind of biases are built into the tool? The opacity of these tools is first and foremost an ethical concern. As technologies of knowledge, generative AI tools afford new types of interactions in the digital realm between researchers and their subjects, as well as among research participants and the general public. As new research addressing bots as 'ethnographers' is rapidly evolving, new guidelines for the ethical and sustainable use of AI are urgently needed with emphasis on caretaking, responsibility and accountability.

4.2 Recommendations

Research in digital contexts is in flux, and therefore the ethical principles that guide research must be reinterpreted and applied accordingly. In the last section of this chapter, we wish to provide some recommendations to meet the challenges identified and suggest some avenues for thinking about ethically sensitive and sustainable ways of conducting research in those shifting digital contexts.

A. Awareness comes first

We start with a claim: it is a matter of critical urgency for researchers and ethics professionals to raise their awareness of the communicative logic of digital platforms as sites of data and platform capitalism and the impact this has on research ethics at all levels. This knowledge must be ongoing and constantly updated as technologies develop. Digital systems are not neutral tools.

B. Processual ethics

We need to think about research ethics in digital contexts as situational rather than fixed or pre-given. This means that researchers need to

be able to rethink ethical principles in the field, in the particular shifting contexts in which they find themselves. Ethics need to be navigated as a process, not as a test to be passed. This may also mean that ethics will require negotiation and compromise; a useful research ethics may

not be able to prevent or avoid all possible risks. But even if imperfect, research ethics can still serve its chosen values, such as transparency and respect for human dignity.

In other words, we recommend an approach to research ethics in which ethics is thought as a method that guides the research process. This method should be transparent, reflective, reflexive and human centered, rather than driven by the logic or values of business or technological development. This approach requires flexibility and attention to contextual meanings and relationships. Such a method, we suggest, is best equipped to establish ethical responsibility and accountability in research. It respects the integrity of both research participants and researchers, and it addresses its subjects not from above or below but on the same plane.

C. Protecting researchers

We call for researchers to recognize ethics as not only protecting their research participants but also a means of protecting themselves from harm. We urge academic communities and institutions advancing social scientific research to develop better tools to protect their researchers when facing harms that threaten to compromise their research, such as trolling, political campaigning or online harassment. While universities aim at visibility and positive press, the trap of visibility can expose researchers to significant risks, including public humiliation and threat.

The awareness discussed above is a necessary part of this recommendation, but it should be extended beyond researchers and ethics professionals to also include hosting institutions, research regulators and national and international funding bodies awarding research programs and grants.

D. Ethics and the law

Finally, we should not confuse research ethics in digital contexts with legal requirements. Legal compliance is not generally sufficient for ethical acceptability, and ethical clearance does not guarantee legal acceptability. Sustainable research ethics must go beyond legal requirements of copyright and other forms of data protection. Furthermore, research ethics should not be dictated by global tech giants and their corporate interests. Even if these companies operate within applicable law, this does not mean that working with them is necessarily ethical. It is up to academia to rethink the rules of ethical research in digital contexts. This requires awareness, reflection and a willingness to listen to and respect researchers' experiences as they navigate the complex field of digital identity and information.

5. Conclusions

In this report, we have outlined some of the challenges that scholars face in conducting ethical research in the humanities and the social sciences in the digital age and suggested some ways they might be addressed. It is not our intention here to solve all these problems. Research ethics is, and needs to remain, a contested terrain where ethics professionals develop protocols that are effective for the contexts in which they operate, and where researchers are empowered to take ethical responsivity for their work.

We are not calling for, or expecting, uniformity in the ethics procedures of universities and funders around Europe or the world. We are, however, pointing out the drawbacks of procedural asymmetries and ineffective mechanisms for communication. Similarly, we appreciate the focus many ethics procedures have on vulnerable individuals and communities and sensitive topics. We are not suggesting a shift away from this focus. We are, however, calling for these categories to be rethought and expanded, and for colleagues to consider how their work can create and shape vulnerability, and not just respond to it. Finally, while we are not claiming that the advent of digital tools and the internet represents a wholly new world for research ethics, we do argue that the specific dynamics of online research, identity and data pose particular ethical challenges for research in the social sciences and humanities that require ethical scrutiny.

In general, we are asking for broader, more flexible, and more responsive ethics procedures based on principles of care that recognize ethics as embedded in particular, ever-changing relationships between researchers, participants, publics, societies, and environments. When systems are overly rigid, they run the risk of devolving into purely administrative hurdles that simply need to be overcome. This serves neither research nor ethics.

We end with two observations that were abundantly clear from our research. First, the vast majority of researchers understand ethics as crucial to their work. We did not see large debates over the ethical values that should govern research. Nor did we see major disagreements about what sorts of methods or practices constituted ethical research in the social sciences and humanities. To be sure, there were differences of opinion about the appropriate use of large, corporate-owned digital platforms for research. Nevertheless, there was considerable agreement that such work posed serious ethical questions that warrant deeper reflection. Researchers want to work ethically and are willing to subject themselves to cost and inconvenience to ensure that they do so. Second, ambitious, interdisciplinary, and comparative research in the social sciences and humanities is of key importance for industries, publics, governments, organisations, and people across Europe and the world. The value and social contribution of research is immense, and delivering that value is a key motivator for researchers across Europe.

The goal of this project is to suggest ways in which research ethics systems can better serve both of these objectives. Ethics systems should support research to be ambitious, rigorous and ethical. We are convinced that this is possible, and we hope this report will help colleagues develop better means of doing so.

Bibliography

Bashir, N. (2019). The qualitative researcher: The flip side of the research encounter with vulnerable people. Qualitative Research, 20(5), 667-683. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794119884805

Bechmann, A., & Zevenbergen, B. (2019). AI and machine learning: Internet research ethics guidelines. In A. S. Franzke, A. Bechmann, M. Zimmer, & C. M. Ess (Eds.), Internet research ethics 3.0. Association of Internet Researchers.

Carroll, S. R., Garba, I., Figueroa Rodríguez, O. L., Holbrook, J., Lovett, R., Materechera, S., Parsons, M., Raseroka, K., Rodriguez Lonebear, D., Rowe, R., Sara, R., Walker, J., Anderson, J., & Hudson, M. (2020). The CARE principles for Indigenous data governance. Data Science Journal, 19, Article 43. https://doi.org/10.5334/dsj-2020-043

Cheah, C. W. (2025). AI-augmented netnography: Ethical and methodological frameworks for responsible digital research. International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 24. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069251338910

Douglas, K. (2019). Operational security: Central considerations. In A. S. Franzke, A. Bechmann, M. Zimmer, & C. M. Ess (Eds.), Internet research ethics 3.0. Association of Internet Researchers.

Franzke, A. S. (2019). Feminist research ethics. In A. S. Franzke, A. Bechmann, M. Zimmer, & C. M. Ess (Eds.), Internet research ethics 3.0. Association of Internet Researchers.

Franzke, A. S., Bechmann, A., Zimmer, M., & Ess, C. M. (Eds.). (2019). Internet research ethics 3.0. Association of Internet Researchers.

Lahtinen, V., & Purokuru, P. (2024). Mikä internetiä vaivaa? [What is wrong with the internet?]. Kosmos.

Locatelli, E. (2019). Academy/industry partnership and corporate data: Ethical considerations. In A. S. Franzke, A. Bechmann, M. Zimmer, & C. M. Ess (Eds.), Internet research ethics 3.0. Association of Internet Researchers.

Markham, A. N. (2019). An “impact model” for ethical assessment. In A. S. Franzke, A. Bechmann, M. Zimmer, & C. M. Ess (Eds.), Internet research ethics 3.0. Association of Internet Researchers.

Markham, A. N., Tiidenberg, K., & Herman, A. (2018). Ethics as methods: Doing ethics in the era of big data research—Introduction. Social Media + Society, 4(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118784502

Masso, A., Tiidenberg, K., & Siibak, A. (2020). Sissejuhatus [Introduction]. In A. Masso, K. Tiidenberg, & A. Siibak (Eds.), Kuidas mõista andmestunud maailma? Metodoloogiline teejuht [How to understand the datafied world? A methodological guide] (pp. 11-41). Tallinn University Press.

Nicole-Berva, O., & Ušča, A. (2025). Resisting epistemic injustice: The potential of vulnerability in research ethics. Qualitative Research. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941251390765

Otañez, M. (2024). Conclusion: Possible futures for the field of digital ethnography. In Exploring digital ethnography (pp. 144-150). Routledge.

Peter, E., & Friedland, J. (2017). Recognizing risk and vulnerability in research ethics: Imagining the “what ifs?” Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics, 12(2), 107-116. https://doi.org/10.1177/1556264617696920

Sumiala, J., & Tikka, M. (2020). Digital media ethnographers on the move – An unexpected proposal. Journal of Digital Social Research, 2(1), 39–55. https://doi.org/10.33621/jdsr.v2i1.37

Takeda, A. (2022). Uncovering ethical concerns through reflexivity—ethics in practice in fieldwork. International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 25(3), 419–424. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2021.1889828

Tapscott, R., & Moxon, S. (2025). Vulnerability in procedural ethics: A study of 44 national research ethics guidelines. Qualitative Research, 1–26. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941251377266

Tiidenberg, K. (2015). Great faith in surfaces: A visual narrative analysis of selfies. In A. Allaste & K. Tiidenberg (Eds.), “In search of ...” New methodological approaches to youth research (pp. 231-256). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Tiidenberg, K. (2018). Ethics in digital research. In U. Flick (Ed.), The SAGE handbook of qualitative data collection (pp. 466-479). SAGE Publications.

Tiidenberg, K. (2019). Research ethics, vulnerability, and trust on the internet. In J. Hunsinger, L. Klastrup, & M. Allen (Eds.), Second international handbook of internet research (pp. 1-15). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1555-1_70

Tikka, M., Huhtamäki, J., Harju, A. A., & Sumiala, J. (2025). Developing digital team ethnography of global media events on social media. New Media & Society, 27(4), 2168-2187. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231207784

Turner, D., & Webb, R. (2014). Ethics and/or ethics in qualitative social research: Negotiating a path around and between the two. Ethics and Social Welfare, 8(4), 383–396. https://doi.org/10.1080/17496535.2012.745583

Acknowledgements

This report is the outcome of the Community Research Ethics Initiative (CREI). This initiative has been supported by the Economic and Social Research Council grant number ES/Y002903/1. It has been facilitated by University College London, as part of CHANSE ERA-NET co-fund programme, which has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme, under Grant Agreement no 101004509.

Participating universities in CREI are the Manchester Metropolitan University (UK), the University of Helsinki (FI), the SGH Warsaw School of Economics (PL), and the Uniiversitat Autònoma de Barcelona (ES). Our thanks to our Manchester-based research assistants Shazia Khan and Alaa Khaled, Sara Perry , Luisa Nienhaus, and Anna Simandiraki-Grimshaw of UCL, Katrin Tiidenberg of Tallinn University, Jenny Rygalska of Chocolate Films, Monika Hunka of the National Science Centre, Poland, all of the researchers, research professionals, and research participants who spoke with us in focus groups and more informally, and all of our CHANSE research colleagues who contributed to this research and helped us develop our ideas. This research reflects the insights and thinking of all these valuable colleagues; any errors are the responsibility of us alone.

About the authors

Joshua Edelman is Professor of Performance at the Manchester School of Theatre at the Manchester Metropolitan University. He writes on the intersections between theatre, religious practice, and political activity in the contemporary West. Since the pandemic, he led the pan-European project Religious Communities in the Virtual Age (Recovira) and the UK project British Ritual Innovation under Covid-19 (BRIC-19). He has recently worked on the award-winning performance research project Granny Jackson's Dead, which explores memory, grief and technology through immersive theatre. He is a member of the Project on European Theatre Systems and is founding co-convener of Performance and Religion Working Group of the International Federation for Theatre Research. His latest book, Studying European Theatre Audiences, was published by Routledge in 2025. He is the co-editor of Performing Religion in Public (Palgrave, 2013), and his articles have appeared in journals including *Performance Research, Amfiteater, Nordic Theatre Studies, Ecumenica and Liturgy.*

Avi Astor is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and a member of the Sociology of Religion Research Group (ISOR). He has written on a variety of topics related to religion, culture, and identity. He is the author of Rebuilding Islam in Contemporary Spain (Sussex Academic Press, 2017). His work has also appeared in several prominent journals, including *Theory and Society, The American Journal of Cultural Sociology, The International Migration Review, The Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, Qualitative Sociology, and The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion.*

Katarzyna Górak-Sosnowska is Professor of Sociology and head of the Middle East and Central Asia Unit at SGH Warsaw School of Economics. Her research focuses on Islam and Muslim communities in Poland – ranging from anti-Muslim racism to Gulf Cooperation Council tourism to Poland – as well as on the contemporary presence of Poles in the Middle East. Her work has been published by Brill and Bloomsbury, and in leading journals such as *The Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies and Patterns of Prejudice"*. In 2025, she joined the editorial team of the *Journal of Muslims in Europe*. She has successfully led research and educational projects funded by Polish, European, and international institutions, including the European Commission, UNESCO, and the Polish National Science Centre.

Johanna Sumiala is Professor in Media and Communication Studies in the University of Helsinki, Finland. She has published extensively on the topics of digital and social media, death, violence and ritual including *Mediated Death* (Polity, 2021) and *Media, Death and Everyday Life* (Routledge, 2013). Her latest co-edited book is titled Media and the Spirit of Populism (Routledge, 2026). She is a series editor of Routledge Studies in Religion and Digital Culture book series and a member in Editorial Advisory Board for the book series on Death and Culture by Bristol University Press.She maintains active role within the Nordic, European and International research networks and has directed and co-directed several interdisciplinary research projects including EU CHANSE funded interdisciplinary research consortium: Digital Death: Transforming History, Rituals and Afterlife (DiDe, 2022-2025) involving PIs in Denmark, the UK and Romania. Currently, Sumiala works on digital immortality, afterlife, arts-based research and new AI augmented methodologies. Sumiala is Visiting Professor at University of Bath, Centre for Death and Society (CDAS).

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101004509