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ORIGINAL PAPER

'What are these researchers doing in my Wikipedia?': ethical premises and practical judgment in internet-based ethnography

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Abstract The article ties together codified ethical premises, proceedings of ethical reasoning, and field-specific ethical reflections so to inform the ethnography of an Internet-based collaborative project. It argues that instead of only obeying formal statutes, practical judgment has to account for multiple understandings of ethical issues in the research field as well as for the self-determination of reflexive participants. The article reflects on the heuristics that guided the decisions of a 4-year participant observation in the English-language and German-language editions of Wikipedia. Employing a microsociological perspective, it interrogates the technological, social, and legal implications of publicness and information sensitivity as core ethical concerns among Wikipedia authors. The first problem area of managing accessibility and anonymity contrasts the handling of the technologically available records of activities, disclosures of personal information, and the legal obligations to credit authorship with the authors' right to work anonymously and the need to shield their identity. The second area confronts the contingent addressability of editors with the demand to assure and maintain informed consent. Taking into account these problem areas, the ethical reasoning on the one hand proposes options for observing and documenting episodes. On the other, it provides advice on the feasibility and the necessity of obtaining informed consent.

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In Internet-based social science inquiry, the moral evaluation of its preparation, execution, and presentation rests to be a main issue. The necessity to account for the ethical implications of studying the use of information and communication technology persists for research that strives to interpret and contextualize social life across online and offline realms even though especially the options to accumulate large amounts of data have recently prompted intense debates (boyd and Crawford 2012).

For sure, there is an ongoing discussion about the varying conditions of 'virtual' or 'real' anthropological research, for instance, in terms of the construction of a site or the authenticity of contacts between participant observer and locals (Boellstorff et al. 2012, pp. 129–150; Hine 2015, pp. 152–154; Markham 2004). Yet what unites the different approaches is that qualitative methods, notably participant observation, interviews, and document analysis in ethnography, hope to maintain an individual and recognizable rapport with their fields and informants (Becker 1964; Dingwall 1980). Moreover, presentations of such inquiries can rarely dispense with indigenous voices and vignettes for cogent displays. In this regard, ethnographies mediated by networked infrastructures become problematic as their materials are stored and promulgated via digital services. These render efforts to obfuscate venues and mask utterances seemingly futile because they can be searched and taken back to their context. As Beaulieu and Estalella (2012) noted, this contiguity of settings and traceability of inscriptions that mark ethnographies of Internet-based fields complicate the ethical decision-making of

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institutional review boards (IRBs). This is not to say that human subjects research ethics are right away incompatible with digital media research. More moderately, they hold that these particular circumstances ask to 'broaden the discussion of ethics beyond IRBs, privacy and anonymity' (p. 24–25).

Starting from this idea, the article ties together codified ethical premises, proceedings of ethical reasoning, and field-specific ethical reflections so to inform the ethnography of an Internet-based collaborative project. It builds on established procedures for achieving viable ethical decisions through practical judgment and applies them in a case study of the English- and German-speaking Wikipedia. The article discusses how a context-sensitive way to arrive at ethically justifiable strategies plays out in an Internet-based participant observation. It therefore contributes to current debates in the social sciences and communication and information studies in particular about the revaluation of research ethics in face of digital media.

The article is organized as follows. First, I review existing literature which argues that an exploration of digitally networked fields cannot solely rely on obeying formal statutes. Rather, the application of general principles to contextual specificities has to account for the self-determination of reflexive participants and their propositions of how they want to be researched. To this end, I set up a microsociological perspective that helps to acknowledge multiple understandings of ethical issues in the field. Second, I introduce Wikipedia as 'a community and an encyclopedia' (Reagle 2010, p. 1). It stands for collaborative online endeavors to foster collaboration and produce information goods. Third, I reflect on the heuristics guiding the decisions and procedures of a 4-year participant observation. There, I interrogate the technological, social, and legal implications of publicness and information sensitivity in order to establish two areas of ethical concern.

Concepts: ethical premises, practical judgment, and reflexivity in a microsociological perspective

Ethical premises play out on three dimensions. Firstly, they take the form of normative principles encompassing, among others, human rights and freedoms. With their underpinnings in ancient and modern Western thought as well as in non-Western philosophies these axioms substantiate more palpable doctrines. Hence, they are secondly informing the legal statutes of personality rights, copyright laws, and privacy laws that ground ethical analyses (Walther 2002; Waskul and Douglass 1996). As such, they become catalyzed by IRBs and other ethical commissions in their regulations of, for instance, privacy protection or confidentiality (Buchanan and Ess 2009; Eynon et al. 2008;

Kraut et al. 2004). Thirdly, these institutionalized standards and organizational panels bring forward criteria to ensure the integrity of scientific procedures and their findings.

Arguably, the urgency to question the ethical dimension of studying the formation, appropriation, and consequences of digitally networked media stems from the loosely coupled dynamics of ethical codification and contextual diversification. On the one hand, we see increasing efforts in the social sciences and beyond to formalize disciplinary codes of conduct and ethics statements like the *General Statement of Standards* issued by the International Communication Association or the *Code of Ethics* of the American Sociological Association. On the other, converging media, potentially global communication, and swiftly circulating information thwart most attempts to transfer codified solutions to presumably novel ethical challenges. This is because they seek to address presumed harms and options in given yet dynamically changing societal constellations. Consequently, responding to the diversification of the empirical field, tailored ethical codices have been proposed (Ess and AoIR Ethics Working Committee 2002; Markham et al. 2012). These recommendations cater to the use of personal information online, the Internet-based recruitment of interviewees, or the storage of electronic data. However, in their attempt to answer the volatile contextual conditions with adapted manuals, these efforts risk to become obsolete all the more they seek to comply with the unsteady materials and methodical peculiarities.

In online ethnographies, the need to constantly rethink and modulate ethical considerations in-between empirical fields and normative provisions has been answered in different ways. Beaulieu and Estalella (2012) urged to adapt the conventions of human subject protection and to rethink the centrality of researchers in ethnographic undertakings. Bruckman (2002) advocated a tiered approach in order to provide different levels of anonymity, while Tilley and Woodthorpe (2011) asked to reconsider the requirements and chances of securing anonymization altogether. Furthermore, Markham (2012) suggested forms of creative fabrication so to compose representative though artificial accounts of events, people, or interactions. In addition to these recommendations, the following discussion argues that the association of ethical premises with contextual specifics must not remain an exclusive matter of researchers (or research teams) but can strive to accept the ethical considerations and conventions articulated in the field, too.

Understanding ethical judgment as *phronesis*

For sure, it is a widely accepted standard in human subjects research that ethical guidelines need to be context-sensitive. In order to advance ethically cogent research, the axiomatic demands, institutionalized dicta, and methodical criteria

have to be conjoined with the particulars of a field. Thus, Ess (2013, p. 27) sees this operation not as a top-down exercise of applying deductive schemes in order to produce unambiguous solutions. Instead, he advocates a bottom-up way of reasoning. This should seek to discern the values and precepts at stake before drawing inferences because there are no a priori rules to determine which ethical premises apply to which particular case. In the same vein, the guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers pose that 'ethical decision making is best approached through the application of practical judgement attentive to the specific context' (Markham et al. 2012, p. 7). An ethnographic practice that is flexible and responsive to local circumstances should, Beaulieu and Estalella (2012) suggest, be particularly capable of engaging in such enterprise.

Ultimately, the call for ethical sensibility and modulation harks back to Aristotle's notion of *phronesis* as 'practical judgement' (Ess 2013, p. 200) or 'virtue of thoughtful reflection' (Gadamer 1975, p. 288). Its tentative and fallible considerations require experience in pondering ethical concerns and handling novel contexts and they usually offer multiple justifiable interpretations. For a participant observation in an Internet-based collaborative project, *phronesis* therefore allows for recognizing multiple primary moral commitments. Besides acknowledging the ethical premises of professional disciplines and academic communities, such dialogical approach values the self-determination of research participants as well as their genuine capacity for ethical reflection.

Acknowledging ethical reflections among participants

The appreciation of field-specific ethical reflections resonates with tendencies to reframe informants as self-expressive authors rather than subjects that have to be spoken for (Bakardjieva and Feenberg 2001; Bassett and; O'Riordan 2002). Furthermore, the move towards such form of ethical judgment suggests itself with regard to Internet-based collaborative projects as their members casually address research ethics. Their views surface, for example, in the codes of conduct of virtual worlds like LamdaMoo or Second Life (Boellstorff et al. 2012, p. 130; Quan-Haase and Collins 2008). More recently, they became evident in the controversies following the Facebook emotions experiment (e.g., Gray 2014). This sort of commentary also links to the 'dense ethical practice' (Coleman 2013, p. 106) of computer hackers through which they were able to craft free software as an avowed alternative to most commercial services. Yet besides accounting for the cultural norms and moral attributes deemed important among amateur participants, ethical judgment might still also have to grapple with proprietary rules and technological settings that Gillespie (2010) called the 'politics of "platforms"' (p. 347).

Employing a microsociological approach towards ethical judgment

At its core practical judgment has to balance ethical premises and claims while not getting caught up in merely reflecting on all corollaries possible without coming to palpable decisions.

In this respect, Goffman's (1967) microsociological insights open up a perspective for treating ethics as multiple and situational while acknowledging the particularities of the locales under study. In his investigation into everyday life and public encounters, he emphasized the interactional order of performative episodes that are accomplished at a given time and in a certain space. Theses gatherings can, following Giddens (1984), also be understood as stations and thus as 'locales in which the routine activities of different individuals intersect' (p. 119). From this view, the situational enactment of episodes in stations forms the essential analytical unit when studying social life. Consequently, in Goffman's (1983) account the time-and-space bound performances are the prime phenomenon by reference to which social relations and institutions are to be understood. As such, they are the phenomenological surround in which people realize their agency and handle the affordances in place. When the technological and social underpinnings of these actionable stations are (made) transparent to the agents, they also become able to better assess the ethical implications at stake. In constructing situative actions, these do not stay mere latent moral issues, but form part of concrete risk/benefit analyses on the side of the people themselves.

Going out from that, episodes and stations might be employed as heuristic devices. Therefore, the ongoing activities found in a field can be segmented into episodes of sequenced interactions so to guide the analytical perspective and proceedings of a participant observation. Its strategies of visiting the diverse sites and assembling a field are then first of all orientated towards interactional episodes and their stations through which other entities like human participants, artifacts, or discourses become accessible. Furthermore, treating a field as consisting of diverse stations which, in turn, entail different episodes can usefully be employed for delineating field-specific ethical circumstances.

Case: ethical reasoning in and about Wikipedia

Wikipedia is both a wiki-based information resource and an active user community. It is exemplary for a population of Internet-based projects that foster collaboration and produce information goods. It has popularized a particular activity associated with information technologies,

namely, that of compiling, systematizing, and distributing encyclopedic knowledge. With its principles of information freedom, user autonomy, and open-minded cooperation it broadly draws on the Enlightenment tradition as well as the fusion of liberal visions and countercultural principles of early U.S.-American Internet technologists (Barbrook and Cameron 1996; Turner 2006). With its more than five million articles in the English-language edition alone, its popularity as one of the ten most visited websites in Western countries, and its cultural significance as a free resource it epitomizes the power of amateur online cooperation (Wikipedia:Wikipedia 2016).

The project belongs to a sort of configurations whose members work together to achieve common goals and produce outcomes, with some of the interactions being mediated by networked technology. Kraut and Resnick (2011) have described such constellations as productive online communities whereas Benkler (2006) used Wikipedia as quintessential example of the so-called commons-based peer production. Considering the ethical implications of studying Wikipedia therefore zooms in on a component of an expanding technological and social formation in contemporary Western societies.

However, for two reasons Wikipedia is also an exceptional endeavor in the field of Internet-based collaborative projects. Wikipedia contributors are, compared to the majority of Internet users, tech-savvy and able to configure anonymity at a level that they deem appropriate. It might also be assumed that they are aware of the public nature of Wikipedia and their activities on the site where lurking is a legitimate activity (Glott et al. 2010; Schroer and Hertel 2009). This probably applies to the inner circle of editors who cannot indeed be measured with the same ethical yardstick as participants in other mediated ethnographies. Furthermore, Wikipedia's openness allows, in principle, a much larger collective to take part. So in spring 2016 the English language version had more than 27.5 million registered accounts whose moral and legal entitlements might be at stake, too (Wikipedia:Statistics 2016). If their activities and conversations come into focus during a participant observation, ethical judgment should seek acceptable decisions without anticipating the level of competence and consideration on their part or, what adds to this, on the side of the largely unrecognized editors working under IP addresses.

Moreover, also compared to commercial platforms, the amateur initiative Wikipedia stands out and makes it a particularly information-rich case (de Laat 2012). Hence the disputes about ethical commitments among Wikipedians as well as between the volunteer editors and the organizational overhead are usually not stifled or taken off-platform but accepted as being vital for the project's libertarian ambition and egalitarian ethos (O'Neil 2009). The wide-ranging ethical controversies have manifested in essays and specifications issued by Wikipedians or the U.S.-based Wikimedia Foundation (WMF), the organization hosting the MediaWiki software and owning the trademark. Their reflections explicitly deal with the status of researchers, the user benefits from Wikipedia studies, and the ways the editors want to be studied (Wikipedia:Don't bite the researchers 2016; Wikipedia:What are these researchers doing in my Wikipedia? 2016). Regarding ethnographic research, the page *Ethically researching Wikipedia* (2016) for example proposes a protocol to reach an agreement between observer and editors. It takes the form of a pledge in which the ethnographer recognizes that she is a guest of the community, that she will respect project decisions, and that she will disclose herself as a researcher. Yet in the end these guidelines have as little force as any other rule in Wikipedia because they are open to debate and modification.

The discussion here is based on my 4-year ethnographic study (2009–2013) where I examined the routines of Wikipedians, that is, the core group of highly active users contributing on average more than one hundred edits a month (Wikipedia:Statistics 2016). With their quotidian work, these editors—about 3.500 in the English-language and 1.000 in the German-language version—sustain the growth of the article base and the project's governance. The ethnography's analytical spectrum encompassed participant observation of interactional episodes and stations at field sites on the MediaWiki-driven platform as well as off the platform at different meetings in Europe and the U.S., interviews, and document analysis. As third person voice is at odds with the ethical reasoning at the core of the argument presented, I deliberately try not to erase my presence in the following discussion.

Application: areas of ethical concern in studying Wikipedia

In order to base the ethical judgment on substantial concerns among the field participants, I paid attention to the vernacular sense-making among Wikipedians. To them, the most cognate criteria to compare stations and episodes and to act appropriately were their modulated levels of publicness and information sensitivity.

Considering the publicness and sensitivity of episodes and stations

Wikipedians cultivated a differentiated sense of audience associated with the episodes and stations of their engagement so that they realized their contributions with regard to multiple measured or presumed audiences. In turn, these assessments of varying levels of publicness came

with expectations about privacy, too. According to Nissenbaum's (2011) concept of privacy as 'contextual integrity' (p. 2), the stations could therefore be described as structured settings associated with roles and social norms that grounded the users' perceptions and administrative efforts as to what kind of information should be treated with what level of privacy. In effect, the participants had a sense of how sensitive or non-sensitive information was in proportion to the publicness of episodes and stations. In such relational rather than absolute understanding, the assessment of sensitivity not only based on the type of information as pertaining for example to personal status or trade secrets. In principle, within a certain situation and station, information of all kinds could be regarded as confidential and in need of protection against unwarranted disclosure (Petronio 2002). The socially shared meanings hence guided the decisions as to which information was deemed appropriate to be revealed about a user and what information could be transferred from one party to another. Wikipedians were especially concerned with their 'informational privacy', as Tavani (2007, p. 131) has labeled it, and thus their ability to autonomously control data they considered to contain personally identifiable information like given names, occupations, or ties to other users. In visiting stations or tracing episodes, I sought to consider these innate determinations that challenged a more straightforward attempt to treat all data public only because it was technically available.

With that, the study aligns with other ethnographies that have been aware of such distinctions developed in online communities (Reid 1996; Sveningsson-Elm 2009; Waskul and Douglass 1996; Zimmer 2010). In this tradition, Boellstorff and colleagues (2012), for example, urged to respect 'not only what is public versus private from an etic perspective, but also what the people we study emically perceive as public or private' (p. 135).

Mapping field-specific conventions of publicness and information sensitivity

In order to advance the practical judgment, I proceeded by distinguishing more or less public and sensitive episodes and stations. Drafting these field-specific conventions, I assumed that episodes occur in discrete stations and that they can be mapped onto a dimension ranging from being (widely) public stations to (strongly) private stations as well as onto a dimension going from stations containing sensitive information to stations with non-sensitive information. Seen together, they are forming distinct spheres (McKee and Porter 2009, p. 20–21; Sveningsson 2004, p. 56).

In other words, the dimensionality of the grid firstly supposed that the participant observation could account for a range of episodes. Each episode was performed within a distinguishable station. Secondly, it operated with a distinction of increasing sorts of potential, empirical, or intended publicness and, vice versa, decreasing privateness as well as of increasing or decreasing information sensitivity. In respect of this X–Y axis diagram, episodes and stations with comparable levels of publicness and sensitivity were assorted in corresponding spheres (Fig. 1).

According to this exercise, I was able to set up four spheres: first, the *open sphere* with stations and episodes that the editors treated as public with no sensitive information. It comprised of stations like encyclopedic articles, wiki pages dedicated to administrative activities, as well as the offline talks and plenaries at Wikipedia conferences. Second, there was the *limited open sphere* of stations and episodes which the authors deemed open but that usually were of limited interest to wider audiences. They should only contain marginally sensitive information meant to be shareable with larger groups without risking serious harm for personal users. The sphere gathered, for instance, talk pages of articles and real-world small-scale workshops or excursions organized by Wikipedians or the WMF. Third, there was the *limited closed sphere* with stations and episodes that the participants used to address more narrow collectives but which were open to potentially extensive audiences. They could contain sensitive information thought to be not appropriate for distribution in larger groups. The sphere embraced user pages and accompanying talk pages, other user-driven outlets like personal webpages or Twitter accounts, and local meet-ups. The fourth domain was the *closed sphere* with stations and episodes considered empirically and intentionally private with critical or confidential information. It was formed by personal conversations and interviews between researcher and informants online and offline.

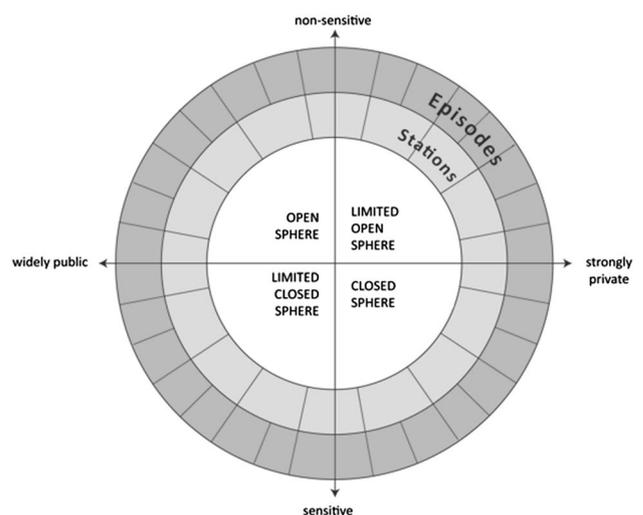**Fig. 1** Episodes, stations and spheres of stations of the participant observation. Diagram by author

Drafting areas of ethical concern

Based on the continua of public or private as well as sensitive or non-sensitive episodes and stations, I established two cognate areas of ethical concern. With their help, I was able to set in relation ethical premises and field-specific aspects. To provide the ethical judgment with a more tangible aid and to chart the options for a practically feasible and ethically justifiable strategy, I adapted a schema proposed by McKee and Porter (2009, p. 23). Thinking through the complexities of Internet research, they offered a casuistic approach that treats ethical decision-making as essentially a case-based consultation with multiple audiences. This involves steps of identifying general norms, acknowledging nuances of context, comparing cases, and deliberating with relevant others in the research field and the scholarly community. Working with the public/private and non-sensitive/sensitive continua, McKee and Porter (2009, p. 88) devised a scheme that extends the X–Y axis grid and can map additional dimensions simultaneously. Necessarily, such schematic visualization reduces the complexity of prevalent ethical considerations because it asks to classify relevant circumstances and to rate conclusions. Consequently, I used the diagrams as instructive aids that helped to visualize my reasoning and prepare decisions (Figs. 2, 3). They were heuristic tools that documented the choices made which could be read off the chart. As such, they functioned as a short hand, not a substitute, for the deliberative process.

As for the relevant areas of ethical concern, I considered, on the one hand, the accessibility of information about users in relation to the need of warranting their anonymity as informants. On the other, I juxtaposed their contingent addressability against the demand to assure informed consent. Aligning with the specifics of each area, the reasoning aimed to discern decisions on the level of episodes placed in stations and spheres, respectively. The schemed allowed for detailing a comparative ethical judgment (McKee and Porter 2009, p. 87). It responded to four main questions. First, if activities, their traces, and concurrent materials could be observed and documented. Second, if sampled material could be selected for quotations in research reports, presentations, etc. Third, if informed consent could practically be obtained. Fourth, if informed consent had necessarily to be obtained.

For the sake of conciseness, I illustrate the heuristics in both areas of concern for two episodes. They are taken from the open sphere and from the limited closed sphere so to consider how the practical judgment played out across different episodes and stations.

Managing accessibility and anonymity

The first area of concern opened up in terms of the accessibility of information in relation to the need of warranting anonymity. More precisely, at least some of my informants were caring about the impact of publicness on the accessibility of personal information about users they considered to be more or less sensitive as well as about the interactional traces recorded through the MediaWiki software or other programs. The accessibility of information especially mattered to them with respect to their anonymity as

Fig. 2 Heuristic scheme for interrogating accessibility and anonymity. Adapted from McKee & Porter (2009)
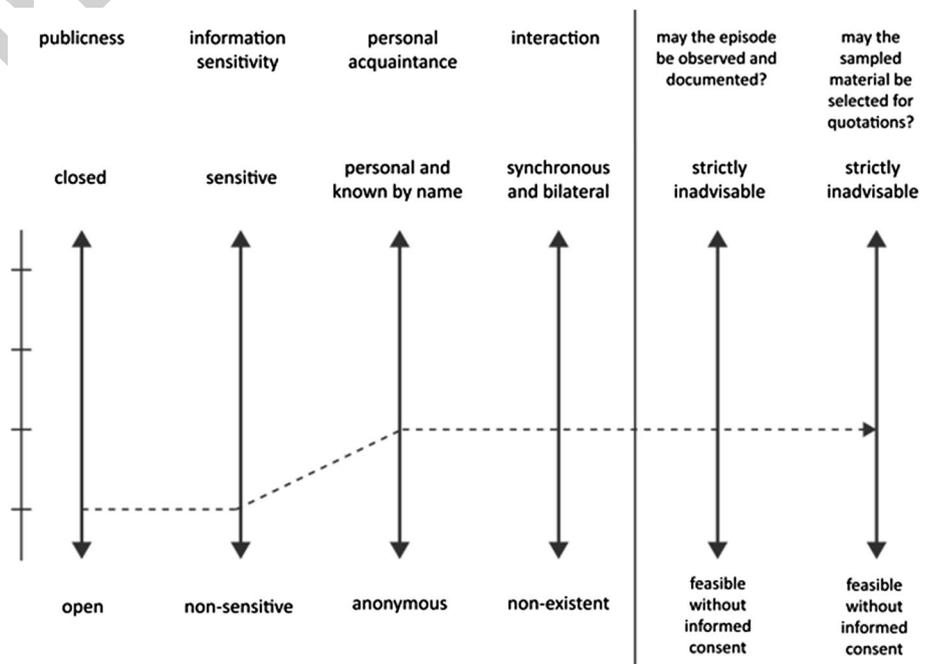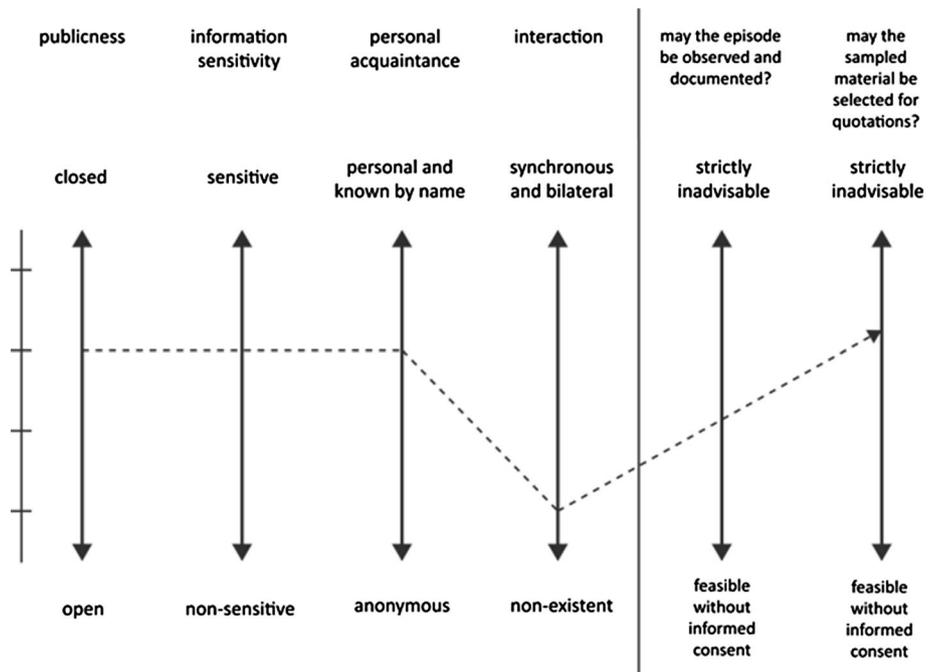
Fig. 3 Heuristic scheme for interrogating addressability and consent. Adapted from McKee & Porter ([2009](#))

participants of the project as well as participants within my research (Sveningsson-Elm [2009](#)).

Note, however, that one part of the Wikipedians in sight was actually fairly frank about their authorship. Some of them referenced articles they had edited on their user page; user names were carried out of the project and popped up in journalistic outlets as well as on other platforms; Wikipedians gave interviews and posed for photographs, they appeared on podiums and conferences using their common name or revealing details about their engagement. Rather than separating their project-based activities on and off the platform from other parts and relations of their life, these users mingled arenas and actively propagated their involvement. This is not to say, however, that this portion of noticeable Wikipedians did always so to boast about their achievements. In fact, they also conceded to the public interest in their workings and conformed to a familiar expectation, for instance promoted by the WMF, to share information about their stake in the project.

Besides activities that compromised user anonymity from the outset, the technological configuration of the platform also provided facilities to track individual authors and chart their actions. Hence, following, in principle, the normative impetus of free knowledge and open collaboration, volunteer users and paid staff strove to sustain Wikipedia as an amenable project where most of the stations with encyclopedic content, edit logs, and discussions were technically available without a check. Moreover, public documentation also was a legal obligation according to the prevailing interpretation of the Creative-Commons-Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0. Consequently, the Terms of Use ([2012](#)) of the WMF indicated that in order to comply with the license, user names would be recorded and distributed either through hyperlinks or Uniform Resource Locators (URLs) leading to a page or a stable copy thereof, or by naming all contributing authors. In the same vein, the WMF's Privacy Policy ([2011](#)) stated that authors should be aware that their platform participation was 'a public act, and editors are identified publicly as the authors of such changes'.

Notwithstanding these dispositions for accessibility, Wikipedians vindicated their right for anonymity, too. Thus, they retained the agency to create a self-contained user persona and to isolate their activity within the project from other parts of their life. For them, preventing identification meant to separate their pseudonymous identity known to fellow Wikipedians inside the project from personal or professional roles, positions, and names outside of it. Besides the option to be active under a pseudonym or without registration, in which case an Internet Protocol (IP) address was registered, the project featured procedures to erase real names and disjoin aliases and civil identifiers. For instance, administrators granted with special maintenance rights could hide single page versions with discriminating information. More precisely, as the MediaWiki software assured the full traceability of every single action and did not support the deletion of entries administrators could make edits invisible for ordinary users while authors with even more powers like oversighters or stewards could do the same on their level again. Furthermore, edits indexed with potentially discerning IP data could retrospectively be assigned to

user names and authors responsible for such illicit 'outing' of editors risked to be banned and were threatened with legal actions for injunction or trespass. With its Data Retention Policy (2008), the WMF moreover declared that it would only collect 'the least amount of personally identifiable information consistent with maintenance of its services, with its privacy policy, or as required by state or federal legal provisions under United States of America law'.

Overall, rather than rendering full openness or strict privacy default settings, this ambiguous coincidence of socially, technically, and legally underpinned accessibility and anonymity allowed Wikipedians at least some freedom to retain or relinquish the publicness of their notable participation. Yet this affordance also raised questions of agency and power among the users. The redaction practices and the possibility for editors to identify themselves or correct previous identifications based on the assumption that authors were entitled, capable, and informed to make reasonable use of the options at hand. Consequently, on one level, their informational self-determination presupposed an awareness of the public dimension of engagement, the confirmation of anonymity, and the endorsement of the legal provisions to disclose indicated authorship. On the other, it was affected by differences in competence and authority as some authors were more experienced and capable in managing favored levels of accessibly and anonymity.

In this situation, the study was not able to preclude all possible breaches of privacy and breakdowns of anonymous authorship precipitated by the informants. But the practical judgment could also not just disband the efforts to shield identities or consign them to the editors. Rather, I was faced with the tension of moderating between the empirical field and the accounts produced in my notes, protocols, and reports. There, the common technique to issue a further set of pseudonyms when disguising field names became problematic because of, as Beaulieu and Estalella (2012) have argued, the potential 'traceability' (p. 29) of quotes and names, that is, 'the possibility of locating digital data on the Internet using search engines or any other mechanism enabled by digital platforms (log files, user profiles, etc.)' (p. 32). This proviso complicated confidential rapport and the concealment of identifying details as all verbatim usages of or exact references to field information online could be traced back to their primary contexts and might be used for '"deductive disclosure"' (Boellstorff et al. 2012, p. 137) on the platform and beyond. While some creators of online content, like the camgirls Senft (2008) studied, who actively promoted their personality might have even welcomed this greater visibility, I had to cope with a loss of control that went beyond the oft-asserted elusiveness of the field but concerned my inability to ultimately guarantee anonymity.

In my attempt to arrive at practically feasible and ethically justifiable decisions, I sought to balance the social, technological, and legal provisions of upholding accessibility and retaining anonymity (Fig. 2). In the reasoning that primed the modulated decision-making for this area of concern, I focussed on two pertinent questions: First, if doings and sayings, their traces, and concurrent materials could be observed and documented. Second, if the sampled material could be selected for quotations in research reports, presentations, etc.

The associated heuristic schema mapped the dimension of public–private episodes and stations along the levels of open, limited open, limited closed, or closed. The dimension of non-sensitive-sensitive information encompassed the levels of non-sensitive, limited non-sensitive, limited sensitive, or sensitive. In addition, the schema ranged episodes and stations according to the level of personal acquaintance between informants and ethnographer on a four-step scale from being either personal and known by name, pseudonymous but identifiable, pseudonymous and not identifiable, or anonymous. Additionally, it evaluated the degrees of interaction between participant observer and project participants on a tentative four-step scale as synchronous and bilateral, asynchronous and bilateral, unilateral, or non-existent. Other possible parameters like the vulnerability of informants were not considered at this stage. Note too that all these continua drafted essentially dynamic relationships. Therefore, the assessments were temporary decisions and subject to change as evaluations of publicness, sensitivity, acquaintance, or interaction shifted. The decisions found for the first and second question ranged from observations, documentations, or presentations being strictly inadvisable; being feasible, but informed consent compulsory; being feasible, but informed consent suggested; or being feasible without previously obtaining informed consent.

In sum, I came to the following conclusions. Without particular approval I only gathered literal passages and quotations from episodes and stations deemed open or limitedly open as well as non-sensitive or limitedly non-sensitive. Observation data and documented materials taken from episodes and stations judged to be limitedly private or private were used in the analytical process but they were only included in presentations when I could get a definite allowance from the users involved or potentially affected. This decision resonated with the pledge on the *Ethically researching Wikipedia* (2016) page that stated: 'Unless I am explicitly told otherwise, I will assume that all off-wiki conversations are off-the record and cannot be quoted in full or in part, attributed, or alluded to either on-wiki or in published works'. Doing so, however, implied to communicate with users directly, eliminating all episodes and stations with only unilateral or without interaction. The

different levels of personal acquaintance made it more or less easy to consult with the authors, but they did not directly impede the use of material at any stage. In addition, I devised a novel set of monikers for all participants so to mask their civil, pseudonymous, or anonymous identity and I conformed to the legal request to name authors by indicating a link to the relevant MediaWiki page.

Figure 2 visualizes the area of concern and the practical judgment for an episode from the open sphere. An example for this was a platform-based review discussion of an encyclopedic article. It involved pseudonymous and not identifiable users with whom asynchronous, bilateral interaction was possible. In reviews, authors submitted entries to be read, commented, and edited by fellow contributors. Usually, assessing the quality of an article initiated further steps of improvement and qualification. Along this trajectory, entries could—if successfully completed—be rated as 'featured articles' or 'good articles'.

Ensuring addressability and consent

In the second area of concern, I juxtaposed the contingent addressability of users against the demand to assure informed consent. Therefore, I sought to account for the insufficient availability and unreliable responsiveness of editors on the one hand and the need to secure informed consent throughout the investigation on the other.

In general, obtaining conclusive informed consent during participant observation is problematic because it should, at best, rest on mutual deliberation and negotiation rather than one-time instruction so to adjust the expectations of the ethnographer and the demands of the informants. Practically, however, such ongoing calibration was particularly problematic for sampling documents and for the retrospective analysis of traces registered by the MediaWiki software. Only few Wikipedians left an address for private contact so to inform them about my study and ask for their approval. In order to make use of data that bore identifying information, my queries had to start at a limitedly closed station, namely, their user page. Notifying them this way already created publicity for the requested analytical endeavor and it established a link between my study and the potential informants rightly before they had a chance of opting in or out of it.

Interacting with Wikipedians in order to explain the intent of my research, elucidate implications, and ask for their voluntary compliance was further complicated by the way, registered and non-registered users could technically enter their user pages. Hence, while the MediaWiki software allowed, as a matter of principle, users to edit without obligatory sign-in, such authors were only able to access their user pages in case they had contributed with a static IP address. Otherwise the pages changed dynamically.

Even when the authors had a user name and could dodge such technological obstacle, they were free to ignore my inquiry or they might have had already dropped out of the project thus leaving my messages unanswered. In consequence, besides the fundamental doubt if informed consent is at all achievable in ethnographic work, I sometimes already struggled with speaking to people and explaining my enterprise in the first place.

Furthermore, while the methodical and implications of open or covert participant observation have been discussed in ethnographic textbooks at length, I basically faced the problem that I could not make all of the required choices deliberately. For sure, it was possible for me to identify as an ethnographer on my user page so that all edits were registered and linked to my profile. Yet my actual presence of reading wiki pages and observing performances was not publicly tracked. In other words, lurking was a socially accepted and technologically afforded activity for Wikipedians. This made it quite easy to take note of platform-based interactions, but it rendered efforts to clearly identify as ethnographer impractical. Due to this lack of structured settings for ongoing dialogue, I could only converse with some, but not all of the editors in view (Boellstorff et al. 2012, p. 134). The setting allowed me to build up extensive relations with a couple of Wikipedians that I met and consulted in different situations online or offline. The less intense contacts, in turn, ranged from occasional interactions and cursory encounters to episodes and stations where Wikipedians had no awareness of me as an ethnographic observer.

Managing addressability while seeking to accomplish informed consent, the practical judgment faced two pertinent questions in this area of concern (Fig. 3). First, if informed consent could practically be obtained. Second, if informed consent had necessarily to be obtained. Similar to the ethical reasoning in the first area, the heuristics took into account the degrees of publicness, information sensitivity, acquaintance, and interaction. The decisions found for the first question ranged from obtaining informed consent being completely feasible; conditionally feasible; marginally feasible; or impossibly feasible. The decisions for the second question spanned from obtaining informed consent being compulsory; appropriate; non-essential; or unnecessary.

Seen together, I proposed the following decisions in this problem area. While it seemed advisable to gain informed consent in all episodes and for all stations, it was mandatory or at least appropriate in observing interactions and collecting documents from episodes and stations that were treated as being private or limitedly private and which contained information thought to be sensitive or limitedly sensitive. Thus, I did not obtain explicit consent to witness and monitor interactions and materials already published

and available that were rated open or limitedly open as well as non-sensitive or limitedly non-sensitive, respectively. However, I considered it compulsory for episodes and stations which Wikipedians treated as being more private and secluded from public view. For obtaining facultative or compulsive informed consent, some episodes and stations, especially where users of known identity or potentially identifiable authors were present, allowed for securing and maintaining informed consent. This also meant that in all episodes and stations where informed consent was expressively refused, my ethnographic work was not authorized to gather interactions or documents. In episodes and stations of pseudonymous and not identifiable or of anonymous acquaintance, though, it proved quite difficult for me to obtain the required consent due to a lack of accessibility. In turn, in episodes and stations where I could practically not secure informed consent, I had to decide whether or not users were known by name or potentially identifiable. In these cases, I discontinued my observation.

Moreover, I sought to undertake an open observation as far as the platform allowed to disclose my scholarly gaze and its academic aim. Thus, I chose a user name close to my common name. I used my user page to post personal information and my e-mail address as well as details about my research. Every edit was done after being logged in so that it could be tracked back to my account. During direct interaction, I pointed to my academic background and offered to communicate off-platform. Only users of full age (18+) were invited for interviews and their user names were replaced with made-up monikers.

Figure 3 visualizes the area of concern and the practical judgment for an episode considered limitedly private. An example would be a platform-based, archived discussion on an editor's talk page where no direct interaction was possible anymore. Editors deliberately used each other's talk pages to leave comments or to argue about all sorts of things. Particularly frequent but also critical points of debate were allegations of making destructive edits—and their refusal. For instance, pseudonymous and anonymous authors debated whether or not it would be correct to ban a pseudonymous but identifiable user they deemed to vandalize Wikipedia.

Conclusion

Starting from the basic idea that an Internet-based ethnography should strive for sound relations with its participants, I have used this article to devise options for a practically feasible and ethically justifiable participant observation that finds its sites both online and offline. Its ethical judgment assumes a pluralistic stance and pursues, at best, the virtue of *phronesis* by seeking tangible and concrete though tentative and fallible considerations. Practical judgment thus hopes to account for the moral self-determination and ethical commentary in the field while also considering codified ethical premises and institutionalized boards. Therefore, it aims at balancing the requirements and deliberations in a research field with axiomatic principles.

With respect to the operations of IRBs and their task to assure appropriate measures for safeguarding research subjects, this piecemeal and open-ended process seems to be at odds with their bureaucratized procedures. The approach's inability to fully anticipate the prospective evaluation of what is often a quite formalistic procedure ties in with a range of problems ethnographic endeavors have with IRBs (Lincoln and Tierney 2004). The ethical judgment not only requires some observation to occur before determining the ethical requirements, but asks for an extensive engagement with a field. Its situated character implies that 'an ethics committee will not have the contextual knowledge relevant to a particular study,' Hammersley (2009) concludes, 'and that such knowledge is essential in order to make sound ethical judgements about what is proposed' (p. 216). In effect it invites to redraft the function of IRBs as ethical regulators and establish what Librett and Perrone (2010) have called a 'dialectic within which ethnographers can communicate more effectively with institutional review boards, and institutional review boards can interpret the subtleties of naturalistic research design more precisely' (p. 731). There might be some institutional tinkering that could promote such forum of advice and debate like the creation of distinct IRBs for ethnographic proposals, the mandate of ethnographers on boards, or the introduction of *ex post* reviews. In order for them be accepted as viable alternatives, however, these and other measures presuppose to appreciate that in ethnographies 'caring interactions are established and maintained over time rather than a contract that once signed is forgotten' (Milne 2005, p. 31). So the dialogical approach conciliating scientific ethical specifications and moral reflections within a field should at best be set in an ethics of care that emphasize relations of accountability between those researched and those researching (Gilligan 1982). Therefore instead of relying on professional standards alone, boyd and Crawford (2012) pose that 'accountability is a multi-directional relationship: there may be accountability to superiors, to colleagues, to participants, and to the public' (p. 673). In consequence, ethnographers hoping to build sound rapport with a field are asked to respond with tact and caution to the ramifications of the ethical decisions made (Boellstorff et al. 2012, p. 129). Safeguarding the integrity of an ethnographic inquiry, then, necessarily has to go beyond securing formal approval because ethics boards are notoriously overburdened in advising on the minutiae an investigation

might want to examine in shifting technological and social environments.

Yet embracing ethical pluralism does not mean to agree with informants per se. Also it does not claim to mitigate every foreseeable—or rather not foreseeable—risk. In fact, the palette of demands that are potentially brought forward from the multi-faceted field is neither mandatory nor could it be resolved by a dichotomous choice between disagreement and approval. On the contrary, through pluralistic reasoning the intentions of telecommunication service operators or platform administrators to impose terms and conditions on research might be considered undue while, in turn, the capabilities of volunteer contributors to reflect on their commitments and to voice concerns in the face of patronizing project management or scholarly analysis can be encouraged. As with all research ethics, such analysis can resort to a deontological strategy that underscores the intrinsic value of the research or an utilitaristic justification of the additional benefit stemming from its insights.

Meanwhile, assuming a pluralistic stance allows for seeing these pretensions not as uniform but diverse interpretations of ethical positions. Instead of attempting to dissolve their heterogeneity, the judgment can start from embracing these incoherent instantiations.

The case I used in this analysis was the online encyclopedia Wikipedia as a chief example of volunteer Internet-enabled cooperation. Compared though to the commercial ambitions of branded platforms, the nonprofit project seems to stand out because Wikipedia (still) keeps up a community-run system of governance among users who are sensitive to interferences from the organizational management. Yet while Wikipedia has started as an amateur experiment, it has evidentially evolved into a dominating information resource whose significant cultural position and public attention is exploited by a professional overhead often at odds with the author base (Jemielniak 2014; Tkacz 2015). Despite their competition, Wikipedia and other platforms then form, as van Djick (2013) argued, 'an ecosystem of connective media' (p. 4) that stipulates, she continued, the 'transformation from networked communication to "platformed" sociality' (p. 4–5). In effect, the proposed approach is especially of use in projects that rest on the participation of volunteers whose enthusiasm also arises from a moral impetus on freedom and self-determination. Yet it also caters to field sites where users experience proprietary or administrative limitations as this is the case on most commercial platforms because the ethical reasoning proposed in this article hopes to carry on their ethical thoughts as well. Creating opportunities for deliberation, the approach seeks to support the users' autonomy. This is, it assumes, more than a formal capacity people have in principle but, according to Raz (1986), also an improvable achievement of making more or better liberal choices.

Nevertheless, Wikipedia cannot easily measure up with the transparent information production that we might assume for academic or educational contexts (Santana and Wood 2009). Yet in their attempt to ensure the validity of information, the editors were keen on maintaining a network of accountability among familiar contributors with a track record of edits. This is not necessarily the case on other collaborative platforms which may emphasize anonymity and crowd-driven discussion or creation. Wikipedia instead relies on attributing authorship to identifiable contributors. To this end, users have programmed sophisticated monitoring tools in order to watch editors and incoming edits (de Laat 2014). They thereby take the open documentation as an indicator of their fellow users' trustworthiness as 'good' and constructive Wikipedians that work in line with policies and guidelines (de Laat 2012; Simon 2010). In effect, authors especially address the moral entitlements of registered users but often leave out non-registered users even though in some cases IP addresses that are recorded for every edit might be more revealing than a cryptic nickname.

Spelling out the ethical considerations and the practical advice in my participant observation among Wikipedians, I established two areas of concern. The focus rested on the different types and degrees of publicness and information sensitivity that Wikipedians associated with episodes and stations of their volunteer contribution. In the first problem area of managing accessibility and anonymity, I contrasted the handling of the technologically available records of activities, disclosures of personal information, the users' different exposure to public view and the legal obligations to credit authorship with the users' right to work anonymously within the project and the need to shield their identity in the research process and its reports. In the second area, I confronted the contingent addressability of editors with the demand to assure and maintain informed consent. Taking into account these problem areas, the ethical reasoning proposed options for observing and documenting episodes. Moreover, it provided advice on the feasibility and the necessity of obtaining informed consent.

Overall, engaging in practical judgment formed part of the study's effort to conduct a viable and plausible participant observation reflecting on both ethical authorities in academia and ethical creeds in an Internet-based collaborative project.

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