Research in the age of mass surveillance: Finding an ethical consensus over new digital visual research methods.

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With digital recording devices now widely available, the power and functionality of these tools may far outstrip what is strictly required for research purposes. **Tze Ming Mok** *looks at some of the specific ethical research conundrums emerging with the use of first-person visual recording devices. Researchers cannot afford to ignore these ethical challenges. The fundamental principles of research ethics frameworks still stand, and are becoming ever more important.*

> *"A child born today will grow up with no conception of privacy at all. They'll never know what it means to have a private moment to themselves – an unrecorded, unanalyzed thought. And that's a problem because privacy matters; privacy is what allows us to determine who we are and who we want to be." – Edward Snowden, Moscow 2013*

Over the last few years it has become clear that a new era of mass government surveillance is upon us. And as the 2014 controversy over Facebook's 'massive-scale emotional contagion' experiment showed, the world of academic social research is not immune from the ethical challenges to privacy and consent posed by the use of digital research methods that hoover up personal data.

'Too Much Information', a review paper we recently published on research ethics, took a very specific cross-section of research literature to get at these concerns. We focused on the ethical practices developing – or not developing – around the increasing research use of first-person digital visual recording devices. This kind of technology is now widely available for use by researchers – from commonly used devices such as iPod Touches or mobile phones used as body-worn cameras, to less common but still public commercial products like Google Glass, to specially designed research tools and memory-aids like the SenseCam – a body-worn digital still camera that continuously takes photos at timed intervals.

As standard commercial digital recording products have become more widely and cheaply available for research purposes, they may end up pushing aside lower-tech devices designed by social scientists to gather enough but not too much information. One serious problem is that the power and functionality of, say, a basic wifi enabled iPod Touch, may far outstrip what is strictly required to gather data needed in an observational study. And once the information is gathered, the risks of transmission to third parties through sharing, hacking, leaking, or just looking, may be higher than anticipated.
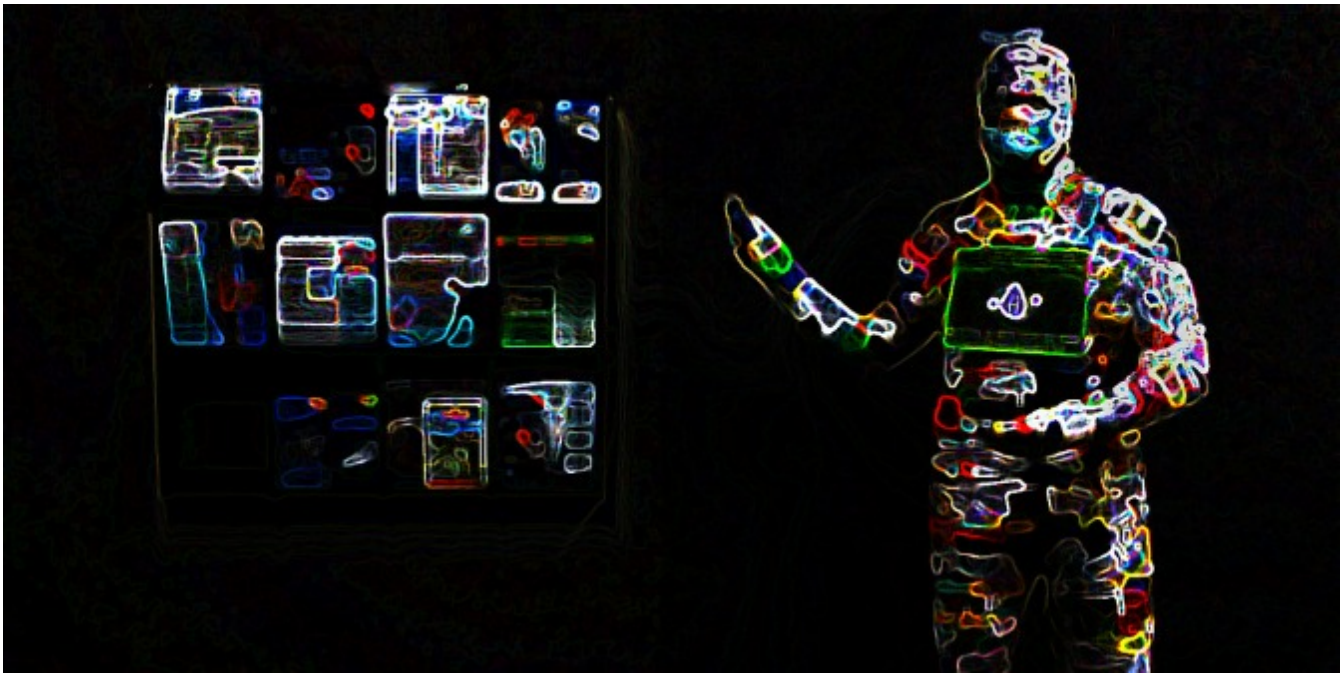
Image credit: Keoni Cabral **Wearable Technology (Flick CC BY)**

We looked at evolving ethical concerns across four fields that should have had something to say about this dilemma, but which were largely disconnected from each other. There was 'Visual ethics' – a pre-internet and qualitative model often based around taking or using still photos in research, such as photo-elicitation, that did not predict new challenges of more intensive digital data collection. On the dystopian futurist side, there were warnings as early as the 1990s from the field of 'Ubiquitous computing' and Computer-Human Interaction about monitoring, surveillance, and threats to privacy, confidentiality and autonomy – although mostly not directly related to research ethics. 'Mobile health' researchers appeared to be leaping into applied research with new monitoring and surveillance technology but are primarily focused on a narrow conception of the IRB model rather than surveillance, privacy or autonomy concerns. And there was also a range of grey literature from applied or market research which was mostly uninterested in ethical issues, but which did include the Google Glass 'don't be a Glasshole' charter in an attempt to protect its experimental users. In short, there has not been a particularly coherent response to the ethical research conundrums of first-person visual recording devices.

There are those who argue that the loss of privacy that comes with constant surveillance and constant social media engagement is the new normal, and that thresholds of consent – and therefore ethical boundaries – have shifted. Some authors have also argued that distributed or crowdsourced forms of research that are emerging through online and digital research, are making old conceptions of ethics and exploitation redundant. However, our paper argues that the fundamental principles of research ethics frameworks still stand, and have become even more important for the protection of research participants.

Four recommendations of what the research community can do to address these evolving ethical concerns:

1. minimizing the detail, scope, integration and retention of captured data, and limiting its accessibility;
2. formulating an approach to ethics that takes in both the 'common rule' approaches privileging anonymity and confidentiality together with principles of contextual judgement and consent as an ongoing process;
3. developing stronger ethical regulation of research outside academia;
4. engaging the public and research participants in the development of ethical guidelines.

You can read more on these recommendations in our recently published article which can be found here: *Mok, T. M., Cornish, F., & Tarr, J. (2014). Too Much Information: Visual Research Ethics in the Age of Wearable Cameras . Integrative Psychological & Behavioral Science, 14 pp.*

Flora Cornish and Jen Tarr teach qualitative research methods in the Methodology Department. This piece originally appeared on the Thinking Methods blog under the title Back to basics: Finding an ethical consensus over new digital visual research methods and is reposted with permission.

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