

As more and more of researchers crisscross disciplines and work together to study or build better social media, we are pressed to rethink the basic methods and the ethical obligations that shape our work. Indeed “ethical dilemmas” are often signs that our methodological techniques are stretched too thin and failing us. When is something a “naturalistic experiment” if the data are always undergoing A/B tweaks? How do we determine consent if we are studying an environment that is at once controllable, like a lab, but deeply social, like a backyard BBQ? When do we need to consider someone’s information “private” if we have no way to know, for sure, what they want us to do with what we can see them doing? When, if ever, is it ok to play with someone’s data if there’s no evident harm but we have no way to clearly test the long-term impact on a nebulous number of end users? This talk will explore some of the challenges facing digital media research today and offer a path forward for reimagining the ethical obligations that come with studying digital domains.