Margins as Methods, Margins as Ethics: A Feminist Framework for Studying Online Alterity

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Abstract
Prevailing theories of marginalized media position the work of resistance as beneath or less than the institutions against which resistance works, raising a number of methodological and ethical challenges for research on online alterity. We offer a margins-as-methods approach for studies of social media on the margins, directing critical attention to the theoretical, ethical, and political implications of positioning subsets of social media users as peripheral to an imagined center. Drawing on theories of feminist reflexivity and our own fieldwork experiences, we articulate the margins-as-methods approach through two sets of practices: deconstructing the power politics behind theories of alterity and identifying how these power politics shape every stage of the research process. We conclude by offering guiding questions for researchers to reflect on as they evaluate the methodological and ethical challenges specific to their projects. The margins-as-methods approach and the reflexive questions it raises build accountability for how our research process may reinscribe the very power relationships that we, alongside our interlocutors, work to contest.

Keywords
internet research, research ethics, feminist research methods, social media, marginality

In formulating research questions about practices of resistance, we typically position the people we study as being on the margins. To approach the study of marginalized or activist media as forms of counterconduct is to position the work of resistance as fundamentally disempowered, and by extension, less legitimate or necessary than the institutions against which resistance works. When do oppositional categories of resistance and marginalization reify dominant power relations, and when do they illuminate meaningful power imbalances in productive ways? Whether we are using digital technologies as tools for gathering data or focusing on digital technologies as topics of study, how do new platforms and devices complicate ethics for research on the margins? As we study perspectives from the margins, what power dynamics in the research process need to be identified and contested?

These questions echo ongoing debates on research ethics and alterity, or the quality of “being alien or unrecognizable to the mainstream” (Lingel, 2017). In the context of research ethics, alterity presents challenges of reciprocity, representation, and uneven power dynamics (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Ahmed, 2013; Borland, 2012; Crenshaw, 1989; Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012; Schlock, 2013; Skeggs, 1994; Smith, 1990; Stacey, 1988). Questions of alterity and knowledge production take on new implications in digital landscapes. At the same time that tools like Twitter and Facebook have created new opportunities for uplifting silenced voices (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015; Shaw, 2012; Yang, 2016), calling out injustices (Freelon et al., 2016; Rentschler, 2014), and building supportive communities (Baym, 2000; Clark-Parsons, 2017; Gray, 2009; Jackson et al., 2018; Keller et al., 2018; Lingel, 2017), commercial platforms are also complicit in the surveillance of activists (Pearce, 2015; Youmans & York, 2012), the co-optation of social movements (Banet-Weiser, 2018), and the harassment of women, people of color, and LGBTQ people, among others (Banet-Weiser & Milner, 2016; Daniels, 2009; Jane, 2014; Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Nakamura, 2013; Noble & Tynes, 2016; Shaw, 2014). What “empowerment” and “disempowerment” mean in the context of studying alternative media practices depends on how researchers conceptualize power relations within the surrounding social fabric, an analytical move that frequently takes place at the earliest stages of the research process.

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This article brings the theoretical and methodological choices scholars make in the study of social media “on the margins” into the foreground of the research process, drawing extensively on feminist practices of reflexivity. Inspired by Markham et al.’s (2018) call for data scientists to treat “Ethics as Methods” and Hesse-Biber and Piatelli’s (2012) discussion of the importance of feminist reflexivity for studying online environments, we make the case for scholars studying social media, identity, and power to treat margins as methods. Markham (2003, 2006) argued that while scholars typically think of ethics as preceding methods, the ethical implications of a research project are neither predetermined by research design nor guaranteed by an Institutional Review Board’s approval. Rather, every methodological choice produces ethical consequences, from planning a project to recruiting participants, from designing consent forms to decisions about representation in final documentation. To address the consequences that emerge throughout a project, Markham urged scholars to reframe ethics as methods, as a practice that unfolds throughout the research process. Similarly, feminist reflexivity emphasizes a processual approach to research ethics, drawing researchers’ attention to “the exercise of power throughout the entire research process” (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012, p. 559). Feminist reflexivity complements Markham’s approach to ethics as methods, particularly in the case of research with marginalized groups, where socially just research design requires scholars to work toward “deconstructing power and cocreating knowledge” (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012, p. 559) with their participants. Following Hesse-Biber and Piatelli, feminist reflexivity is especially important for studying marginalized groups in online environments because digital media complicates already imbalanced power relationships between the researcher and the researched. Drawing on these influences, we offer a margins-as-methods approach as a feminist framework for studying media and alterity. Our approach asks researchers to thematize explicitly the theoretical and political work of positioning the relationships between media and alterity as peripheral to an imagined center. By combining feminist reflexivity with existing discussions on internet research ethics, we contribute a new framework for the study of alterity online.

Having established a reflexive stance toward the theoretical frameworks used to bound the field site, the second set of practices pushes researchers to examine how these frameworks shape the data collection, analysis, and presentation stages of the research process. Placing our own experiences from the field in conversation with existing reflections and guides on qualitative methods for internet research (Burrell, 2009; Hine, 2015; Markham & Buchanan, 2012), we highlight the ways theories of marginality intersect with internet studies and the technologies we study.

After describing and modeling these practices, we conclude by offering guiding questions for researchers to reflect on as they evaluate the methodological and ethical challenges specific to their projects. Citing feminist theories of difference (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989; Haraway, 1988; Hartsock, 1990; Smith, 1990), we underscore the value of subjugated knowledge for projects focused on digital marginality and outline questions for ethical decision-making that foreground participants’ expertise and well-being in the research process. Taken together, these practices and guiding questions push toward a research process more closely attuned to the values, needs, and political projects of digital media-makers “on the margins.” Ultimately, for scholars whose work revolves around the internet, alterity, and social justice, the margins-as-methods framework interrogates the political, theoretical, and ethical implications of the terminology we bring with us into the field.

Before turning to the practices of a margins-as-methods approach, we want to clarify our understanding of the category of “marginalized.” Our own expertise comes from studying activist and countercultural groups, and this project grew out of conversations around negotiating power dynamics that stem from labels like “marginalized” and “alternative.” Determining what constitutes the center versus the margins is a slippery process that reflects and is shaped by a researcher’s perspectives and values. Standard definitions of marginality can apply to anti-vaxxers, flat earthers, or nationalist extremists as much as feminist zinesters or drag queens. It is largely our commitments to feminism that have drawn us to studying communities to which we belong or with which we empathize. This is not to say that feminists cannot or should not undertake studies on groups that are on the margins but in opposition to a researcher’s personal values (For a helpful guide to research ethics associated with these groups; see Marwick et al., 2016). However, the margins-as-methods approach we outline here stems specifically from our shared experiences of researching activist and countercultural communities with whom we shared cultural and political values. In addition, we should note that we draw explicitly on qualitative and interpretive methods to develop our concept of margins-as-methods. While our expertise and examples come from a qualitative perspective, we hope that this concept may be helpful to researchers using a broad range of techniques and approaches to study groups and perspectives from the margins.
Reflecting on Terminology

The development of a research project typically begins with defining the phenomenon under study in conversation with existing scholarship. Even when taking inductive, bottom-up approaches to theory-building, as in the case of grounded theory, scholars frequently draw on extant terms and frameworks as “sensitizing concepts” to guide their analyses (Blumer, 1954; Charmaz, 2006). For those studying the internet and alterity, theoretical frameworks delineating structures of power can help researchers construct and orient themselves toward their field sites, which in turn have implications for methodological ethics (boyd, 2015; Burrell, 2009; Gray, 2015). Despite the fundamental role such sensitizing concepts play, discussions about the relationship among theory, methods, and ethics rarely take place and if they do, they are often left behind the scenes of the research process.

The margins-as-methods approach is rooted in practices of feminist reflexivity, which encourage researchers to “explore how their theoretical positions and biographies shape what they choose to be studied and their approach to studying it” (Hesse-Biber & Piattelli, 2012, p. 560). Following this approach, in this section, we track internet researchers’ usage of three terms: counterpublics (Fraser, 1992), countercultures (Lingel, 2017; Turner, 2010), and alternative media (Atton, 2002; Downing, 2001). Within top journals in internet and media studies, these terms emerged as the most salient frameworks for describing and analyzing alterity. The terms we use to describe the people and practices we study are inscribed with ideological values and unpacking the stakes of these different concepts allows for a more precise discussion of research ethics.

Counterpublics and Countercultures

The counter in “counterpublic” and “counterculture” signals a space or group with an explicitly antagonistic stance toward a more mainstream, dominant order, defined primarily through its opposition to established power structures. Offering one of the most-cited definitions of counterpublics, Fraser (1992) described “subaltern counterpublics” as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate countercodiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (p. 67). Within counterpublics, marginalized groups deconstruct structures of exclusion and develop alternative practices and discourses of inclusion, which they then broadcast to more mainstream publics. The term “counterculture” also draws its power from its opposition to culture in the mainstream. There are, however, important differences between the two concepts. Counterpublics connect through a shared marginalized identity and experience of subordination, while countercultures are not necessarily the product of social, political, or economic disenfranchisement. Rather, they come together through shared ideological opposition to mainstream norms, politics, and values (Curran, 2012; Fox, 1987).

Our review of existing scholarship turned up case studies on a diverse array of internet communities, movements, and practices, including the counterpublics of racial justice advocates (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015, 2016; Kuo, 2018), girl feminist bloggers (Keller, 2012), and trans activists (Jackson et al., 2018), queer Instagram users (Duguay, 2016), and the countercultural practices of hackers (Rosner & Fox, 2016), drag queens (Lingel & Golub, 2015), file-sharing collectives (Diamant-Cohen & Golan, 2017), and meme creators (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). Existing scholarship describes digital counterpublics, such as hashtag campaigns, as focused on the production and circulation of discourse to broadcast critiques of exclusionary structures and demands for inclusion (Jackson et al., 2018; Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015, 2016; Kuo, 2018; Penney & Dadas, 2014). Digital countercultures, however, emphasize tolerance for dissenting ideologies, such as in a platform’s user guidelines or policies. Drawing from cultural studies and science and technology studies, digital media theorists have used the concept of counterculture as a framework for understanding tensions between mainstream and alternative values as they manifest online (Curran, 2012; Lingel, 2017; Ross, 1990; Turner, 2010). Both terms provide researchers with language to articulate continuities in marginalized groups’ media practices over time and highlight the possibilities the internet offers for more democratic communication (Jackson et al., 2018; Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015, 2016; Steele, 2016, 2018; McCosker, 2015).

At the same time, when researchers treat the public/counterpublic and culture/counterculture relationships as simple binaries, they risk oversimplifying contextual complexities. Approaching the field with a singular emphasis on digital counter-behaviors can lead researchers to, in Abu-Lughod’s (1990) words, “romanticize resistance” (p. 42) and lose sight of the complex power relations structuring the field. Crenshaw’s (1989) concept of intersectionality pushes against such single-axis frameworks for analyzing power and instead advocate for more expansive frameworks that highlight the full complexity of interlocking systems of oppression. For example, Renninger’s (2015) case study of the asexual community’s use of the Tumblr microblogging platform as a counterpublic space highlighted how “the politics and affordances of platforms may encourage, tolerate, or prioritize counterpublic address on their platform” (p. 1526). Even as they support counterpublic address, however, platform politics may also constrain countercultural expression (Lingel & Golub, 2015) and leave members at risk of repression and harassment from state authorities and opponents (Neumayer & Stald, 2014; Penney & Dadas, 2014).

Applying terms like “counterpublic” or “counterculture” wholesale to a group of social media users can also erase intersecting differences in identity (see Squires, 2002). As a case in point, Kuo (2018) demonstrated how women of
color formed smaller counterpublics within the broader feminist counterpublic on Twitter to circulate intersectional critiques through the #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen and #NotYourAsianSidekick campaigns. In addition to differences in identity, classifying an entire group as singular counterpublic or culture can obscure differences in access to power, which are complicated by emerging digital metrics of influence. Jackson and Foucault Welles’ (2015, 2016) research on networked counterpublics, for example, demonstrated how leaders with high degrees of influence emerge within Twitter hashtag networks. Beyond erasing in-group differences, an identity-driven approach to defining a counterpublic or culture risks reifying the existing hierarchies that position participants on the margins in the first place (Downey & Fenton, 2003).

Alternative Media

Like the prefix counter-, the descriptor alternative signals active opposition to the mainstream. Yet, researchers and activists have long disputed what exactly is alternative about alternative media. Atton’s (2002) highly cited definition locates the “alternative” nature of alternative media in both their form and content. Alternative media-makers’ values infuse their creative processes, which involve “radicalizing the methods of production” and “rethinking what it means to be a media producer” (p. 4). Boundaries separating alternative from mainstream have grown murkier in the digital environment, where activists and marginalized communities use corporate platforms to launch interventions and build movements. Lievrouw (2011) expanded on Atton’s (2002) definition to make space for digital projects that, although dependent on mainstream, commercial technologies, embody the subversive ethos of alternative media. “Alternative/activist new media,” she argued,

take advantage of the recombinant, networked nature of the new media infrastructure, and the ubiquity and interactivity that they offer users, to create innovative projects in which people extend their social networks and interpersonal contacts, produce and share their own “DIY” information, and resist, “talk back” to, or otherwise critique and intervene in prevailing social, cultural, economic, and political conditions. (p. 19)

Alternative digital projects follow a long history of radical media, including underground newspapers, small-press publishers, and pirate radio stations.

Within internet studies, scholarship has used the term “alternative media” to describe digital messages and practices that subvert the dominant order. Research on citizen journalism, for example, has demonstrated how activists appropriate digital platforms to circumvent the gatekeeping functions of commercial or state-sponsored outlets (Ataman & Çoban, 2018; Neumayer & Stald, 2014; Suwana, 2019). Researchers studying alternative media producers have also documented how digital technologies enable people who are underrepresented in mainstream media to share their experiences and perspectives (Florini, 2017; Khalil, 2013). In both cases, researchers cite the prevailing image of digital networks as participatory, horizontal, and democratic to argue that the internet lends itself to the do-it-yourself, subversive, anti-establishment ethos of alternative media (Clark-Parsons, 2017; Downey & Fenton, 2003; Gehl, 2015; Lievrouw, 2011).

Like “counterpublic” and “counterculture,” the opposition between the margins and the center implied in the descriptor “alternative” allows researchers to deconstruct dominant media systems while also imagining more liberatory modes of communication. Given the focus on production, theories of alternative media also allow for parsing relationships between participants’ politics and their digital practices. Moreover, literature documenting the long history of alternative media offers researchers necessary context for historicizing alternative new media practices.

Alternative media theory, however, was developed in a context where media power was centralized within large, conglomerated mass media companies, who broadcasted messages in a top-down flow from producers to consumers (Gehl, 2015). Today, participatory internet platforms complicate the distribution of media power. Platforms like Facebook and Twitter simultaneously provide infrastructure for more democratic, bottom-up media practices and for the surveillance and monetization of alternative discourse (Florini, 2017; Gehl, 2015; Neumayer & Stald, 2014). When social media practices are labeled as purely alternative media, the complexity of this entanglement between resistance and hegemony is lost.

Ultimately, for researchers studying alterity online, approaching digital media users, spaces, and practices as counter or alternative to the mainstream reveals certain power imbalances while obscuring others. In reflecting on their conceptual differences, our goal has been to call attention to what these terms highlight and occlude. As theoretical frameworks, these terms come with connotations (and baggage) that need to be addressed and justified.

Identifying Methodological Challenges

Once a researcher establishes a critical stance toward the terminology she brings with her into the field, practicing feminist reflexivity extends to the methodological and ethical questions this terminology raises for studies of media, identity, and power. As our review earlier illustrates, theories of power and resistance shape how researchers approach studying social media on the margins before they even enter the field, yet the methodological and ethical consequences of these sensitizing concepts are often left unaddressed. Shedding light on the relationship between theory and methods draws researchers’ attention to how their methodological
approaches may disempower or silence their participants. Once these challenges have been identified, the margins-as-methods approach promotes what Hesse-Biber and Piatelli (2012) have described as “participatory knowledge-building practices” that “bring alternative forms of knowledge into public discourse” (p. 560). Carrying feminist reflexivity throughout the research process enables those studying digital media on the margins to center participants’ voices and experiences.

In this section, we outline the second set of practices of the margins-as-methods framework: identifying how theory informs our orientation toward our field sites and participants. Feminist reflexivity calls researchers to account for differences in participants’ identities, contexts, and needs in their approach to methods and ethics (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012). Similarly, given the broad range of inquiry the field of internet research encompasses, Markham and Buchanan (2012) advocated for a case-based approach to methods and ethics, “so that ethical research can remain flexible, be responsive to diverse contexts, and be adaptable to continually changing technologies” (p. 5). Following this casuistic, processual approach and citing existing reflections on qualitative methods and examples from our own fieldwork, we address methodological issues of data collection, analysis, and representation.

**Data Collection: Power Relations Between the Researcher and the Researched**

When studying marginalized groups and communities online, the theories we bring into the field can oversimplify complex power relations and intensify power imbalances between the researcher and the researched. As noted in methods literature, power dynamics between a researcher and participants are inescapably uneven (e.g., Ahmed, 2013; boyd, 2015; Gray, 2009). For informants and interlocutors, involvement in a study requires time and labor, and the benefits of participation for the researcher versus the researched skew heavily toward the former.

Power imbalances can be exacerbated in online environments, where researchers can lurk unnoticed and where the data collection process can feel removed from the people under study. The emerging body of scholarship on Twitter hashtags offers a case in point. The Twitter Application Programming Interface (API) allows researchers to harvest large datasets of publicly posted tweets, in many cases connected to authors’ usernames and geolocations, without having to obtain consent from or even notify the authors. While the availability of Twitter and other social media data through API streaming platforms opens up new possibilities for internet researchers, it also raises a number of difficult ethical challenges (see Hargittai & Sandvig, 2015; Markham et al., 2018). Because Twitter data harvesting does not involve collecting information directly from individuals, scholars, and institutional review boards (IRBs) often do not define this mode of data collection as human subjects research, meaning these projects are not submitted to IRB for ethical consideration (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). Without traditional consent procedures, internet users swept up in large datasets lack agency over their involvement and representation in research projects (Hine, 2015). This is especially problematic for scholarship on marginalized and activist internet communities, who are already embattled in struggles over agency, representation, and surveillance.

In her study of #MeToo movement, for example, Rosemary used the Twitter Streaming API to collect nearly 30,000 hashtagged tweets (Clark-Parsons, 2019). She initially approached the hashtag as a networked counterpublic, acknowledging the underprivileged nature of the sexual violence survivors who shared their experiences under the hashtag. This theoretical orientation to the case study raised questions of how to best protect and uplift the marginalized voices of #MeToo throughout the research process. On the one hand, following Hine (2015), the use of the API to collect “found data” (p. 159) enabled Rosemary to reconstruct activists’ perspectives on the #MeToo movement and identify trends in their hashtag practices without asking them to perform labor for her project by participating in interviews or other more obtrusive research methods. On the other hand, however, the #MeToo dataset contained deeply personal and potentially compromising stories of trauma, abuse, and survival. Following AoIR’s (Markham & Buchanan, 2012) recommendations for ethical decision-making, Rosemary took a contextual approach to #MeToo participants’ privacy to limit any risk to those quoted throughout her presentation of the data. While all of the tweets captured by the Twitter API were publicly available when archived, #MeToo participants did not consent to publicizing their tweets and identities beyond the Twitter platform. With this in mind, Rosemary used pseudonyms or omitted handles altogether and made minor alterations to participants’ word choices, such that their tweets retained the same meanings but could not be traced back to the authors through a search engine. While these practices may protect the identities of marginalized populations, they ultimately function as a band-aid solution that masks the larger problem of distinguishing users and content. Internet research does not have to involve direct contact with human subjects to extract data from lived experiences (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). For researchers studying identity and power online, the challenge becomes engaging with personal data in a manner that does not further disempower groups and communities on the margins.

**Analysis: Participatory Knowledge-Building Processes**

The terms we use to theorize the people and communities we study inscribe particular power relationships. Existing theories
may help illuminate the marginal status of a particular group or community, but as the review in the previous section illustrates, they may also obscure or reify complex systems of power. One strategy for navigating this trade-off involves building an emic/etic approach to data analysis and theory-building (see Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 61). As qualitative researchers and ethnographers, we often rely on participants to provide the best vocabulary for describing their identities, practices, histories, and perspectives. This emic vocabulary then becomes the building blocks of our analysis, laying the foundation for emergent theoretical frameworks. But even when our analysis is grounded in participants’ vocabulary, when left uninterrogated, the terminology we use to describe our findings may conceal more than it reveals.

From a feminist perspective, rooting our theoretical concepts in the lived experiences of alterity is crucial. In addition, collaborating with participants to deconstruct terminology can shed light on complex processes, relationships, and experiences that might otherwise remain unstudied. For example, in conducting comparative analyses of relationships to digital media within three countercultural communities, Jessa worked at length with participants to navigate alignment on vocabulary (Lingel, 2017). An early question in interviews and focus groups with all three groups was “tell me what word you use to describe yourselves as a group.” Each group preferred the term “community,” but rather than taking this term at face value, it was crucial to unpack the ways that this term was also contested in each group. To open up a space for this kind of unpacking, Jessa relied on two key steps: reviewing literature on the term “community” to build a list of common threads and tensions, and including interview questions about ways the term did not work. This reflects an etic/emic approach to analysis, drawing on outside terminology from scholarship as well as analysis from within the group being studied. That participants agreed on a term does not mean they used it uncritically—participants frequently identified collective struggles to bridge the gaps between the communities they wanted versus the communication they had. By making space in the research process for reflection on the term “community,” Jessa could tap into a richer and more complex set of narratives about community dynamics. An emic/etic process provides a different approach to calls for inclusivity—in addition to being mindful of diverse subject positions and demographics in terms of the participant pool, a margin-as-method approach encourages thoughtfulness about how participants can be included in the process of building theory.

In her ethnographic study of a secret feminist Facebook group, Rosemary engaged in a similar process of knowledge-building with participants (Clark-Parsons, 2017). When she began her fieldwork, moderators and members frequently described the group as a “safe space” for women and nonbinary individuals. What safe space actually meant within the context of the group, however, remained unclear. Instead of simply adopting this terminology and taking the group’s safe nature for granted, Rosemary conducted interviews with moderators and members to understand what “safe space” meant to them and whether the group lived up to their expectations of safety. She drew on existing safe space literature to build a list of interview questions focused on articulating how “safe space” is conceptualized and practiced. Their answers revealed a number of paradoxical tensions between members’ ideal vision of an inclusive safe space and their necessarily exclusionary practices for maintaining group boundaries. Revealing this complexity in conversation with participants moved Rosemary toward a more robust conceptualization of “safe space” as a feminist project that is both politically transformative and problematic.

**Presentation: Politics of Labeling**

Research with marginalized people and technologies requires the time, expertise, and goodwill of our participants. Feminist methodology insists on robust and reflexive strategies for valuing the people we engage in our scholarship. At a minimum, respect for our participants requires ethical and thoughtful representations of them in our work, whether we are producing articles, monographs, reports, films, or other forms of scholarly communication (Hesse-Biber & Piattiello, 2012; Stacey, 1988). Writing from the perspective of digital ethnography, Leonardi (2015) posed a series of questions tied to ethics of representation, including, “whose perspective do you take? What activities are important enough to include in the ethnographic record? Who gets to decide what counts as an important activity” (p. 103). It is in large part the academic process of documentation that cements uneven power dynamics. In a sense, publication gives researchers the final say in how participants are portrayed.

The labels we use in the final presentation of data can have repercussions for the well-being of the people we study and their relationships with those in positions of power. Drawing on theoretical frameworks to describe participants’ practices as counter or alternative to those in positions of authority can put them at risk for increased surveillance or repression. Jessa, for example, encountered ethical tensions in her representation of a group of participants and the legality of their countercultural practices. The study revolved around the information practices of a punk community (Lingel & Golub, 2015). Rather than using official venues, shows largely take place in houses (and more specifically, basements) of community members. To avoid police awareness of shows, the punk community has developed specific tactics to keep online information legible only to the community, like using code names for houses that host shows. During the writing process, disagreement arose among co-authors around deciding how to describe the legality of basement shows. If we chose to describe the shows as illegal (because they violated landlord agreements, fire safety regulations and tended to involve the circulation of alcohol among minors), we effectively reinscribed the viewpoints of
the police and potentially jeopardized participants’ safety. Yet, the punk community justified its secrecy specifically in terms of police intervention: the tactics they developed only made sense in the context of the threat of legal repercussions. Working through this issue of labeling required substantive discussion among researchers and member checks with participants. Eventually, we opted for the term “quasi-legal,” which reflected the nebulousness of the community’s legal precarity (when police intervened, they typically shut down the shows rather than pressing charges) while acknowledging the community’s main driver for secrecy.

We are not suggesting that researchers delve into every concept, term, label, or description with this level of reflection; such a process would be burdensome and likely produce overly abstract scholarship. A high degree of reflexivity is, however, necessary for unpacking concepts central to the researcher’s inquiry, preserving participants’ agency, and assessing the power dynamics underlying the research process. Our framework asks, are the terms I use to describe the group emic or etic? Do participants align with the label, and have they been given opportunities to reflect critically on the labels used to describe themselves and their relationships to each other, to marginality, and to the mainstream? We build on these questions in the following section to develop a guiding framework for moving toward ethical internet research practices.

Guiding Questions for Approaching Margins-as-Methods

Having described the general practices involved in approaching margins-as-methods in studies of alterity and technology, this final section raises a series of key takeaway questions concerning data collection, analysis, and presentation. Rather than prescribing a blanket set of practices for ethical research, we conclude with these questions to guide internet researchers studying marginalized communities for their own benefit (Cooky et al., 2018) to marginality, and to the mainstream? We build on these questions in the following section to develop a guiding framework for moving toward ethical internet research practices.

Data Collection

To center the marginalized and activist communities under study, we must prioritize their perspectives and participation from the earliest stages of the research process. As Luka and Millette (2018) argued in their feminist framework for big data analysis, approaching internet research with a feminist ethics of care involves acknowledging that the researcher’s perspective is one among many and creating space for participants’ situated knowledge. In practice, this requires creating multiple opportunities to check in with participants about preliminary findings and developing inclusive data collection practices. For example, to incorporate accountability into her analysis of Black trans women’s digital networks, Bailey (2015) developed an advisory panel of Black women and queer thought leaders on Twitter and Tumblr, with whom she consulted throughout her research process. As internet researchers develop their own approaches to accountable research methods, questions to reflect on include the following:

- How can we involve community members at the start of the research process to develop a project in line with their goals or needs?
- Can all community members participate in the data collection process?
- What forms of checking in with various stakeholders are in place to produce a holistic sense of the people and practices being studied?

A feminist ethics of care for our participants also requires that we acknowledge the labor of participation. In their reflections on big data social media research, Cooky et al. (2018) highlight the asymmetrical power relationship between researchers studying marginalized communities online and the actual members of those communities. Activist women of color denounced this disparity in a 2014 statement titled #ThisTweetCalledMyBack, calling out academics, journalists, and others for mining the digital content of marginalized communities for their own benefit (Cooky et al.,
Research relies on the time, energy, and openness of participants and the benefits of conducting human subjects’ research tend to accrue to researchers. Researchers collecting data from marginalized groups and/or activists, who often have limited time and resources to spare, should consider the following:

- How can we recognize and value participants’ contributions? What steps can we take to compensate them? How can we develop a more robust understanding of reciprocity?
- What would it look like to act in solidarity with the community under study, during and after the data collection stage?

Consent is a key element in any data collection process involving human subjects, but it is especially vital to feminist approaches to the study of marginalized groups and communities online. As Leurs (2017) has argued, ensuring that participants maintain the right to control their own digital data is key to an anti-oppressive approach to internet research. Institutional ethics frameworks typically conceptualize consent as a dialogue between researchers and participants that occurs at the beginning of a project (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). Studying marginalized populations in the digital environment, however, requires a more processual approach to consent. Inspired in part by Christen’s (2012) call to reconsider whether information really wants to be free, we believe it is crucial for internet studies researchers to develop robust processes of consent:

- Participants may give us permission to observe or participate in their communities at a specific time and place, but circumstances can change. Has the researcher developed a process for checking in with participants throughout the process of fieldwork, and after?
- Particularly in the context of the digital, how can we ensure a careful and robust process for safeguarding data?
- When data collection is indirect rather than in person, how can we ask permission for inclusion?

Analysis

During the analysis stage, centering participants on the margins involves holding their perspectives in the same regard as scholarly writing. This is particularly important in internet research, where the lack of face-to-face contact can make participants feel one step removed from the researcher. In their study of hashtag feminism, for example, Mendes et al. (2018) emphasized the need to prioritize the voices of marginalized participants, whose lived experiences of digital platforms are often complicated by online harassment and hate speech. To avoid reinscribing power and foreclosing analysis through the application of etic theories and frameworks, consider the following:

- Member checks do not have to take place after analysis, as a form of asking participants to agree or disagree with our findings. Rather, we can use member checks to foster conversations that guide analysis. Have participants been given the opportunity to contribute to the process of building knowledge?
- Does the theoretical language and framing being used obscure the lived reality of participants?
- Part of the privilege of the academy is having a platform for critique. If participants have voiced a critique of a technology or device, in what ways can we amplify those concerns?

Presentation

Regardless of the form or genre the final presentation of the analysis takes, the researcher ultimately determines how to represent participants. When studying marginalized and activist communities already grappling with negative stereotypes or public images, the presentation stage requires careful consideration:

- Have participants had the opportunity to affirm or contest terms being used to describe them, their communities, and their practices?
- When it comes to studying groups who are marginalized in some way, how can we avoid further marginalization? Does the theoretical framework reinscribe or exacerbate participants’ marginalized status?

Studying marginalized and activist communities in digital contexts raises a unique set of questions regarding participants’ privacy during the presentation stage. While participants’ digital expressions may be publicly available, as Linabary and Corple (2018) argued, digital platforms blur the boundaries separating public and private and institutional ethics frameworks have not kept pace with shifting definitions of privacy in the digital age. With these challenges in mind, researchers should take a contextual approach to protecting participants’ identities, in line with participants’ personal expectations for privacy and publicity:

- What forms of protection or agency have we offered participants as far as not revealing identities, practices, and rituals?
- Alternatively, what forms of publicity and documentation are useful to participants, which might fall outside the scope of traditional scholarly communications?

Our own research experiences demonstrate that developing universal practices and ethics for all projects is neither practical nor desirable. The methodological and ethical
challenges a researcher faces will vary alongside the people, technologies, and contexts under study. We offer a margins-as-methods approach as a feminist framework that creates checkpoints throughout a project. The approach outlined here—reflecting on terminology, identifying methodological challenges, and engaging reflexive questions—works toward fostering accountability for how our research process may reinscribe the very power relationships that we, alongside our interlocutors, work to contest.

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Note

1. We reviewed scholarship on marginalized groups’ and activists’ social media practices published in the following journals: Convergence; Information, Communication, and Society; Journal of Computer Mediated Communication; Mobile Media and Communication; New Media & Society; Social Media + Society; and Television and New Media. We recognize that the scope of our literature search may lead to the exclusion of work published elsewhere that offers alternative frames for studying marginality. Limiting our search in this manner, however, allowed us to focus our discussion on internet research.

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