

Justice-oriented Research in Peace and Conflict Studies in Times of Social Distancing

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ABSTRACT

Not only since the COVID-19 pandemic, many research processes had already been increasingly digitized to maintain global exchange of information efficiently. For years, scientific empirical studies have been conducted in politically sensitive contexts using digitally mediated methods, entailing numerous risks as well as potentials. One goal of digital research is to also capture marginalized voices. With emerging risks related to digital research, such as digital surveillance and social media monitoring by adversaries (e.g., the military in Myanmar), research needs to be more thoughtfully conducted. Considering research ethics, an evolving discrepancy between security measures and values of social justice, such as accessibility and representation, appears as most data-secure applications are not used widely and offers such as “Free Basics” entice people to use rather data-unsecure applications. Reflecting on this existing discrepancy in ethical requirements, I illustrate challenges of the German research context related to digitally conducted research focusing on overt conflictive social contexts.

KEYWORDS

Accessibility, Digitally Mediated Methods, Ethical Research, Sensitive Context

1 INTRODUCTION

It is not a recent discovery that society and also scientific research are shaped by power asymmetries, raising questions about equity and social justice. Although the privilege and “right to research” [1] remains reserved exclusively to a minority of the global population and continues to dominate at numerous research institutions, some institutional structures and individual views are slowly changing by picking up intersectional, decolonial, or feminist ways of thinking. In recent years, more and more researchers have raised their voices, calling for change in how research is conducted, by restructuring teaching and methodological approaches [2]–[4]. However, realizing critical approaches in our predominantly male-dominated, cis-gendered, white research community is challenging. Certainly, some researchers, including myself, find it difficult to adequately embrace different perspectives, to critically reflect on one's own position, and to holistically understand different contexts. This is likely related to our own cultural imprinting [5]. Scholars conducting research outside their “familiar set-

ting” may encounter different perspectives and circumstances during their research that they had previously not been aware of. Therefore, it seems important to reflect upon the way in which such circumstances are dealt with. In this workshop paper, I will reflect on such incidents by presenting concrete examples drawn from my own research experience. For an accurate understanding of the provided examples, it is important to mention that as a German researcher (socialized in Germany) working at a German research institution, I generally need to comply with the official German regulations. In general, I believe that consideration should be given to whether certain regulations, such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR¹), applicable to, e.g., German researchers can be applied to other research contexts (here: outside of Europe), where different laws and practices prevail. In some cases, this is advocated by, e.g., German research institutions – especially when it comes to (data) security and privacy relevant issues. Data security and privacy regulations have become particularly important in times of the COVID-19 pandemic, when research has been mainly conducted using digitally mediated methods. Incidents from recent years indicate that information and communication technologies (ICTs) present both advantages and disadvantages.

According to Zeitzoff [6], ICTs have different effects: They increase the speed of information transmission, lower the communication costs, democratize participation, and provide alternatives to mainstream media. While I consider these aspects to be rather positive, numerous aspects related to the use of ICTs exist with negative implications. New technologies enable varying actors (e.g., government, military, terrorist groups) to expand their power, leading to more digital surveillance, state repression, and control [7]. This can be seen very recently in Cambodia [8] and in concrete examples of the Pegasus spyware, identified amongst human rights activists and journalists in El Salvador, for instance [9]. In general, analog and digital spheres are increasingly overlapping as ICTs play an ever more vital role in our daily lives [10]. Consequently, the choices we make about ICTs, the content we post online (e.g., on social media (SM)) and share via ICTs may have devastating consequences in the “real and analog” world. SM inspections and subsequent arrests or violence are not uncommon in authoritarian states such as in Myanmar since the military coup in February, 2021 [11]. As researchers, we should be constantly aware of such risks when operating in sensitive and conflict related contexts – in particular, whenever personal data

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¹ Since 2018, the GDPR is a European regulation that harmonizes the rules for processing personal data across the European Union [48].

(e.g., name, profession, political orientation) are collected. Drawing on reflections by Grimm et al. (2020) [12], I consider it important to keep in mind that information deemed non-critical at the time of data collection might become detrimental at a later point. This applies especially to authoritarian states or regions of democratic backsliding. Coming from peace and conflict studies and human computer interaction (HCI), I particularly question how research can be conducted in a justice-oriented manner in times of social distancing and in times when global inequalities become more apparent [13].

In case empirical (ethnographic) research will be carried out digitally in sensitive contexts, ethical guidelines [14] and concepts such as *do-no-harm* [15] and *duty of care* [16] shall be taken into account to protect both study participants and research associates. Broadly speaking, ethical research implies that research needs to be conducted safely, securely, and justly in order to protect participants' welfare and to ensure their autonomy [17]. Reality proves that this is often easier said than done, since many different aspects need to be considered. Overall, safety-relevant and ethical aspects differ greatly depending on the context and the situation, leading to the fact that every situation shall be evaluated individually. On this basis, I pose the following question: Which parameters should generally be considered when conducting justice-oriented research using digitally mediated methods in the field of peace and conflict studies to enhance representation and privacy? It seems important to mention that in some cases, ethical considerations, safety, and security concerns are even diametrically opposed to each other, which will be illustrated later by presenting concrete examples. In principle, it seems essential to bear in mind that already early stages of research are intertwined with questions of social justice, determining matters of representation, reflecting power relations including structurally unequal access to resources (in this case SM or the internet). Reflecting on personal experiences, I note that safety, security, and representation (as important values associated with social justice) share a tense relationship in the context of (European) research ethics. This is not to say that security and upholding privacy rights of survey participants is not of utmost importance, especially with regard to discussions on security and privacy as unequally distributed goods for “the haves” [18], [19]. Rather, I want to point out that requirements with regard to digital data collection and management that focus on participants' security can lead to exclusion of already underrepresented groups. Notably, appropriate representation of conflict actors is as relevant as fair representation in design studies – as in both cases, underrepresentation may lead to an amplification of structural inequalities.

2 RELATED WORK

In the following, concepts within political science and HCI addressing research ethics and social justice will be presented.

2.1 Justice-oriented Research and Research Ethics

Generally, numerous academics – especially in the social sciences – consider it necessary to conduct (empirical) ethnographic research in sensitive contexts to investigate stakeholders' needs, grievances, and dynamics [20]. Since many research projects, particularly in peace and conflict studies, are perceived to be high-

ly sensitive, ethical debates about obligations and responsibilities are increasing [17], [21]. Fundamentally, thinking about one's responsibilities seems essential throughout the entire research process since numerous challenges may emerge at different levels, such as during data collection or data analysis [22]. Approaches such as *do-no-harm* [15], [23] and *duty of care* [16] have been discussed within the social sciences for years, most notably when research has been conducted with vulnerable groups (e.g., refugees with traumatic experiences) [24], [25]. In various ethical and philosophical concepts, justice plays an important role, as it is often perceived to be a fundamental norm of human coexistence [26], [27]. Following the idea of livable coexistence for everyone, Young (2011) [28] developed the concept of *responsibility for justice* in social processes to describe individuals' responsibility for structural injustice. To enable justice in the long run, the well-known justice researcher John Rawls (1971) [27] advocates continuous critical questioning of existing conditions, considering different perspectives and life conditions.

Considerations of those approaches, originating often in the social sciences, are not only applicable to issues within the social sciences. Other disciplines, such as medicine, similarly raise many considerations of ethics, justice, and privacy. The Belmont Report from 1979 [29] created by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, for example, is a well-known report, which is equally applicable to other disciplines. According to the report, three key ethical principles help in designing a conflict-sensitive research process. Firstly, *respect for person*, which embraces that “individuals should be treated as autonomous agents [...] and that persons with diminished autonomy are entitled to protection” [29, p. 4]. This implies that individuals deliberate over personal goals and act on this basis. Furthermore, this principle entails that study participants receive sufficient background information to be able to assess if they wish to participate voluntarily. The second principle involves the concept of *beneficence* and is closely linked to approaches of *do-no-harm* having a long history in medical ethics. The fundamental premise is that possible benefits of participants shall be maximized and possible harms be minimized. The third principle relates to *justice* and thus to e.g., “fairness of distribution” and how people can be “treated equally” [29, p. 5]. Based on these three principles, considerations can be applied to one's own research project. Since some criteria may seem quite abstract at first, they need to be adjusted according to one's own context, which in practice is not always easy. However, I believe that numerous considerations and concepts from different fields can be applied to other research fields in order to learn from each other.

2.2 HCI Contributions on Social Justice and Design Studies

When considering how people use technology in the age of rapid technological advancement, HCI becomes particularly important. With regard to my research interest, it results that various HCI works have already focused on social justice [30] and research ethics [31]. Design-oriented research is often conducted where the focus lies on conducting design processes which entail artifacts that generate more just socio-technological interactions [32], [33].

Considering the discipline's interest in the collective use of technologies, HCI is dedicated to a variety of issues that touch structural inequalities [30]. Prior works have elaborated on social justice and identified recognition (of societal structures of power such as race, class, gender), enablement and distribution as relevant points of referents for justice-oriented science [30], [34]. Overall, with regard to the former notion of recognition and community-orientation, justice is being increasingly understood not only, but also as the absence of (unequally and structurally distributed) harm, as well as fair conditions by more HCI scholars that allow communities to fulfill their potentials [2], [30]. For example, values such as safety have been foregrounded [30], aiming at a fair distribution of and access to resources, which can be intangible as well [19]. Further, and with particular regard to research communities such as HCI, scholars have focused on the issue of just, rather than mis- or underrepresentation of marginalized people, reflected by citational patterns, hierarchies in databases and neglect of negative effects [35]–[37]. These important investigations indicate that invisibility of structural injustice is not only fixed by verbal discourse but is the result of a variety of practices as well as the unequal distribution of resources.

HCI takes on design process-oriented approaches to social justice, including the reassessment of researcher-“research subjects” relations and post-positivist perspectives incorporated by third wave HCI [18], [38]. Coming from peace and conflict studies [39], I consider the transnational use of technologies such as SM under different contexts of state-society relations. I find the identified values associated with social justice to be relevant in the conduct of virtual ethnographies in general (whether or not for design purposes). Irrespective of prospective development, any research process involving digital tools and qualitative research, such as interviews or participant observation, requires processes of case selection and data collection.

Connecting the various disciplinary debates can be fruitful as both are founded on political theories of justice and society [40]–[42]. However, while paying particular attention to notions of human cooperation as well as conflictive settings, peace and conflict studies, which largely “lag behind” in integrating decolonial approaches [3], can benefit from HCI's critical perspectives on technologically-mediated interactions, design and data practices. Thus, I want to shed light on my experience of trying to conduct socially-just research which leads me to propose constant reassessment of security and community asset-based enablement [30]. While this has partly already taken place in ethics committees which have to weigh costs (risks to both researchers and interview partners) and benefits (merit to research community, society); compliance with legal rules (e.g., GDPR compliance) reflects security standards to be fixated permanently. In the following, I exemplify how issues of social injustice can play out and are entangled in the context of conducting research “from afar”.

2.3 Justice-Oriented Research in Times of Social Distancing

Regarding digital research, the state of literature reveals that some studies have already dealt with ethics and justice-oriented approaches [31], [43], [44]. As Markham and Buchanan [31, p. 606] point out, “ethical issues [related to the internet and digital materi-

als] have for many years focused on areas such as representation [and] privacy (...)”. In the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, questions related to privacy have increasingly been raised in various disciplines such as medicine, since online medical consultations and chatbots in the healthcare sector have been used frequently to consult patients at a distance [45], [46]. Depending on the level of sensitivity of data being collected, the importance of addressing data security and privacy differs. Since I am mainly conducting research in sensitive and politically disrupted contexts, I am aware that the data collected should be treated with sensitivity. However, the reality proves that it is nearly impossible to consider all potential threats, as not all factors, such as digital surveillance, can be fully considered [e.g., 34]. Consequently, a residual risk always seems to remain, which, however, ought to be kept as small as possible, following our responsibility as researchers.

So far, significant differences exist in the extent to which research institutes and disciplines have addressed ethical and security-related issues in digital research. Given the lack of binding ethical guidelines in Germany, it remains open which guidelines regarding data security, privacy, and ethics shall be applied when conducting research. As a German researcher, I am often told to comply with legal regulations such as the GDPR, since they set standards on data security and privacy for all member states across Europe [48]. However, I question whether I necessarily need to comply with these requirements for empirical ethnographic research outside Europe as well, considering that not all legal regulations and security precautions are applicable to other contexts and might even cause problems. I personally consider it problematic to attempt to impose certain concepts developed in Germany or Europe to other contexts without taking a concrete, in-depth look at local circumstances. In the following, I will present concrete examples drawn from my research experience to further explain the partially existing ambivalence between ethics, safety, and security, with implications for social justice.

3 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS: JUSTICE-ORIENTED RESEARCH IN PEACE AND CONFLICT STUDIES USING DIGITALLY MEDIATED METHODS

My experiences in sensitive contexts, such as Myanmar and Nigeria, indicate that some of my security claims may lead to problems in some (repressive) countries and contradict with other social justice values such as representation and access. In the following, I will refer to situations in which research was conducted via digital means and where I have identified tensions between ethical considerations, justice, data security, and the GDPR. I believe that my considerations are certainly applicable to other research contexts.

3.1 Data-secure Messengers: Opportunity or Risk?

Generally, instant messengers play a key role for conducting research, since they are currently recognized as one of the most important forms of communication. Global comparison indicates that numerous messenger and SM providers such as WhatsApp (2 billion), Facebook Messenger (1.3 billion), WeChat (1.251 billion), QQ (591 million), and Telegram (500 million) remain in the lead with respect to user numbers [49]. Nowadays, an increasing

number of critical voices are being raised to abandon, among others, Meta/Facebook (messenger) and WhatsApp due to security flaws and to switch to more data-secure instant messengers, such as Signal or Threema, offering strong end-to-end encryption and storing little metadata [50]. It seems important to note that many providers such as WhatsApp are continuously working to improve security standards, among others, trying to meet existing requirements such as the GDPR. Nevertheless, they still display security flaws [e.g., 19].

Even though numerous negative aspects about certain applications are increasingly known, most people still use them – particularly for communication. For researchers, the challenge now arises to determine which communication tool can be used to conduct empirical studies in sensitive contexts, where the privacy and security of study participants should have the highest priority, and where the right of participants' self-determination is not undermined. In addition to access and data security considerations, external guidelines sometimes come into play. In some cases, researchers need to follow official guidelines of their institution or their institutional review board (IRB) when conducting research, which prescribe certain security standards, such as the GDPR. Since hardly any of the instant messengers, except for Threema, meet all criteria required (e.g., end-to-end encryption, use without providing personally identifiable information, server location in Europe)², a large number of messengers do not seem suitable for sensitive research purposes, considering privacy related concerns, according to official guidelines. At the same time, in practice, data-secure instant messengers such as Threema do not seem to be suitable for most research studies, as they are hardly used worldwide. In 2021, Threema only had ten million users [52], which is very little compared to other applications. In many regions of the world, Threema plays little to no role. Moreover, downloading the application costs money (3,99 Euro in 2022) [53], posing a hurdle for some financially weak individuals.

In case only particular applications, such as Threema, are considered as suitable for research in sensitive contexts, certain studies may potentially not be conducted, because potential study participants may not use the requested application. Here, a tension between data security and participation becomes clearly evident. In terms of justice-oriented research, this raises the question of how voices can be heard and how individuals may participate in research studies without (primarily) using data-secure communication tools, complying with, e.g., the GDPR. Another important aspect to consider is that particularly in sensitive contexts, in which peace and conflict research operates, "field" access is often impeded due to other safety concerns [54]. In such cases, technical achievements usually allow gaining access to research contexts that were previously even more difficult to approach and enhance participation of people often not heard [55].

Another relevant aspect that I find important to address with regard to instant messengers, ethics, and privacy is the aspect of

potential analog smartphone controls. Generally, it should be critically highlighted that in some (authoritarian) countries, encrypted and data-secure applications may cause skepticism in case of a phone control by potential adversaries. Some authoritarian actors may become suspicious and wonder why the person is using such an application despite the rest of the population using other messengers. As already illustrated in the introduction, people in Myanmar have experienced cell phone inspections since the military took over power in February, 2021 [11]. According to people from Myanmar that I have spoken to, some individuals were heavily scrutinized based on certain applications untypical for the country. This concrete example illustrates again that data security may be diametrically opposed to (physical) safety. Such potential occurrences should be critically considered in advance of each research study.

In summary, these examples have shown that certain notions of security and safety cannot be easily transferred to other contexts. I recommend context-specific considerations of whether less data-secure applications may be used in some cases in order to promote participation and to minimize potential suspicion by opponents. However, I do not intend to suggest to use less data-secure applications in general or to lower research standards. In fact, I believe it is very important that data-secure applications gain popularity worldwide. In general, I am rather trying to demonstrate that certain regulations, such as the GDPR, are not always suitable for research purposes. Furthermore, I personally find it important to consider potential study participants' preferences regarding the applications to be used. For me, representation and the right to self-determination are strongly linked to justice-oriented research.

3.2 Free Basics: Improved Connectivity or Dependency?

In addition to rather insufficient security standards, companies such as Facebook/Meta are criticized for providing "Zero rating" and "Free Basics" [56], [57]. "Free Basics" (in form of an application or website) were initially offered particularly in countries of the Global South, such as India, Myanmar and Nigeria, ostensibly to provide financially weak individuals to "benefit from the wealth of information" [58, p. 1]. According to Facebook/Meta [59], "Free Basics" help people discover the relevance and benefits of connectivity with free access to basic online services". Whether that is the real intention or whether other incentives dominate is questionable. To provide "Free Basics", Facebook/Meta generally cooperates with other mobile providers, allowing additional services such as Wikipedia to be available in a slimmed-down version. Adjusted to the usually weaker network infrastructure, only text-based versions are generally available [56], [60]. Fact is that due to existing power asymmetries and inequalities, many people in numerous countries, particularly in the Global South, cannot afford large amounts of (mobile) data due to the high costs and financial difficulties, which is why such offers are tempting to gain access and to stay in contact with beloved ones. However, such offers reinforce dependencies, hegemonic structures, and digital colonialism [58], and in some cases violate net neutrality [58].

² For a more detailed description of different messenger services, the studies by Botha et al. (2019) [50] and Wagner et al. (2021) [47] are suitable.

Similar to 3.1, the question arises of how to communicate with individuals, who only have access to less data-secure applications because of offers such as “Free Basics”.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In general, the workshop paper illustrates that researchers often face challenges in deciding which applications to use when conducting research using ICTs, particularly SM and instant messenger. Reality demonstrates that currently few data-secure and even GDPR compliant applications, such as Threema, are used worldwide. Consequently, less data-secure applications such as Facebook/Meta or WhatsApp remain dominant – partly because of offers such as “Free Basics”. I advocate that such offers should be critically scrutinized, considering both advantages and disadvantages, as well as aspects of accessibility and dependencies. Here, leaning on Rawls idea of justice, several perspectives should be taken into account [27].

The workshop paper illustrates that I, as a German researcher, need to follow certain regulations, such as the GDPR, even if they do not apply to other contexts, e.g., outside of Europe. I question whether researchers should always comply with official regulations, if well-justified arguments exist, ensuring representation and security. The presented examples illustrate that fully complying with some regulations, such as the GDPR, and exclusively using selected data-secure applications may reinforce power asymmetries by excluding people, who mainly use less data-secure messengers and other applications. In peace and conflict studies, this mainly involves people in the Global South, who are already exposed to numerous other inequalities. Therefore, when using digitally mediated methods, I consider it essential to constantly reflect (at best with the study participants or local experts knowing the local context) on which ICTs and networks should be used during empirical studies in politically repressive contexts. Meanwhile, some applications, such as Signal, exist that are relatively data-secure and are more widely used around the world. In general, it is important to reflect upon the fact that one's own notions of e.g., security and social justice cannot necessarily be transferred to other contexts. The example from Myanmar has shown that smartphone controls by the military are common practice since the military coup in 2021, which I can hardly imagine in Germany, for example.

In general, with regard to justice-oriented research, I request that we, as researchers, should reflect on how to deal with the fact, that in certain cases, data security, accessibility, self-determination, and representation stand in opposition to each other. Overall, I generally believe that in certain situations, data security, self-determination, and representation are hardly compatible and that no universal solution exists that could resolve the challenges presented here. It seems that in certain contexts not all aspects can be accomplished. Therefore, it is necessary to examine very context-specifically and intensively which aspects are perceived as most important to a certain period. Moreover, the right of self-determination of the potential study participants should be considered here. Approaches from different disciplines, such as HCI and peace and conflict studies, may be helpful during the process of reflection, highlighting different aspects [e.g., 29–31].

Considering post-/decolonial research in liberal, highly institutionalized contexts, more attention should be paid to study participants' experiences and needs (with regard to access, security, and representation) to ensure their agency [3] and create conditions for enablement [30]. Here, I sketch how justice-oriented values show their ambivalences when state-society relations are an important variable to ethical evaluations of research processes. Continuous re-assessment of ethical requirements is seen as necessary instead of reviews of research designs based on formalized points of reference which can lead to underrepresentation of already marginalized voices.

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