Fieldwork in the Era of Social Media: Opportunities and Challenges

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ABSTRACT Social networking sites have recently garnered academic attention for their role in fostering democracy and openness in both developed and developing regions. Unfortunately, in political science, this newfound interest has not yet translated into a greater interest in social media as a methodological tool for researchers conducting fieldwork. How has the era of social media influenced the way political scientists conduct their fieldwork? How can researchers make the most of the opportunities offered by social networking sites while abiding by the strict standards of their ethics board? This article highlights the potential in social networking sites for recruiting participants and gathering data and looks at the impact sites such as Facebook have had on building and maintaining trust with research participants. In contrast, it explores how social media may compromise one's ability to uphold the "do no harm" principle guiding all academic research by jeopardizing participants' confidentiality and anonymity, a risk deemed especially high for vulnerable populations or sensitive regions. Insight gleaned from the researcher's own fieldwork in two minority provinces of Indonesia in 2010–2011 is used as a case in point.

The chants of "You, Facebook? You, Facebook?" welcomed me nearly everywhere during my four-month long fieldwork in Indonesia in 2010–2011. This is not surprising given that, with 43,831,880 members and counting, Indonesia is now Facebook's fourth largest market after the United States, Brazil, and India (Social Bakers 2012). Even political and religious figures have embraced the site, including the country's president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, whose Facebook page once counted nearly half a million fans, and Chairul Tanjung, one of the country's top Muslim clerics who sits on the board of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), the country's leading Islamic council (Cutler 2011).[1] In themselves, those impromptu friendship requests posed little problems as most people simply wanted to befriend someone from abroad or to practice their English. But whether or not to establish an online presence in the field and to engage with your participants on social networking sites raises important—although rarely addressed—ethical issues.

All researchers abide by the creed of doing no harm: the underlying idea being that no one should suffer one way or another for having participated in a research project. This principle is particularly important if one's fieldwork takes place in a "higher-risks" region—for instance, a nondemocratic or democratizing region where group conflicts have recently occurred—or if one's research

subjects are so-called sensitive populations like national minority groups who are particularly vulnerable to social discrimination, government repression, or police harassment. How has the era of social media influenced the way political scientists conduct their fieldwork? And how can researchers make the most of the opportunities offered by social networking sites while abiding by the strict standards of their ethics board? As this article demonstrates, engaging with participants on social networking sites can yield important benefits for the researcher, notably in respect to data collecting, participants' recruitment, and gaining and maintaining participants' trust. Nonetheless, engaging with research participants in the virtual world may simultaneously compromise one's ability to uphold the do no harm principle guiding all academic research by jeopardizing participants' confidentiality and anonymity, a risk deemed especially high for vulnerable populations or sensitive regions. The author's own fieldwork in two minority provinces of Indonesia is used as a case in point. The virtualization of fieldwork is not without risks for the researchers and their participants, but if these risks are carefully weighted and managed, political science research and fieldwork may benefit tremendously from these technological advances.

ETHICS BOARDS, RISKS ASSESSMENT, AND FIELDWORK IN INDONESIA

To be allowed to conduct a study with human subjects, researchers first must have their research approved by their university's ethics board, which ensures that said subjects come to no harm.

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Whereas the ethics review process was initially introduced to end medical studies inflicting (mostly) physical harm to its participants,[2] the process also seeks to manage and reduce other types of harm—including psychological, social, and legal risks—that are prevalent in political science and sociological fieldwork. The type of research to be conducted, the level of risks associated with one's research region, and the vulnerability of one's research participants are all considered to determine the most appropriate measures to mitigate any harm to the research participants.

My own research project explores the political and socioeconomic impact of internal migration into Indonesian and Chinese minority regions.[3] Two Indonesian provinces were selected—Lampung and Riau/Kepulauan Riau[4]—for they both have a substantial minority population and a history of internal migration. The provinces differ, however, for Lampung has a long history of large-scale, state-organized *transmigrasi*[5] dating as far back as the turn of the twentieth century, whereas migration to Riau/Kepulauan Riau is more overall recent and mostly involves spontaneous, economic migrants. During the four-month Indonesian fieldwork, my research assistants and I interviewed 108 people: most were either members of the local minority group whose homeland had experienced significant demographic and ethnic change, or they were migrants themselves. While the research locations for which I was granted access gave relatively little concern to my university's ethics board, the degree of vulnerability of my research participants was a different story. Extensive measures were necessary to protect the participants' safety. Their anonymity was protected either by not collecting their names or

less-carefully worded messages posted on Facebook.[8] Because interactions on a social networking site are not necessarily guided by researchers, the latter get a greater sense of what their participants think is important by examining how concerns and "statuses" are framed.

This increasing virtualization of interactions between researchers and participants, however, brings up an important question: can an "informed consent" ever be granted on social networking sites? During a face-to-face interview, an informed consent, either verbal or written, is required before a researcher is allowed to ask questions and gather information. What can and cannot be included into a research project is relatively well delineated: that is, from anything discussed after the researcher has introduced himself and the participant has given his or her informed consent up to the final debriefing when the participant is given the possibility to ask questions or add anything "off the record." Data collection using social networking sites such as Facebook is not nearly as well defined. After you have friended someone and introduced yourself as a researcher, can you legitimately assume that an informed consent has been granted and that any piece of information posted on your friend's wall is fair game for you to use? If I have not personally faced this dilemma—indeed, no information has so far been collected using my friends' comments on Facebook—it is not far-fetched to assume that researchers soon will have to answer this thorny question. Ethics boards need to be better adapted to the growth in popularity of social networking sites and to prepare for the eventuality that more and more researchers will use Facebook and other social networking sites

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by using pseudonyms while writing (research locations, however, were not anonymized), all data were secured and kept confidential through an encryption program, and audio recordings of interviews were destroyed shortly after they were transcribed.

ESTABLISHING AN ONLINE PRESENCE IN FIELDWORK THROUGH FACEBOOK

Considering the Facebook frenzy that has overtaken Indonesia in the last three years,[6] it was just a matter of time before I had to decide whether to use Facebook in my research project—either by "friending" former or hopefully future research participants or for collecting data. Engaging with participants on a social networking site like Facebook provides researchers with an online presence in the field that, incidentally, gives them access to a treasure trove of information. By friending certain people or "liking" certain pages, researchers suddenly become insiders of some sort, aware of several "updates," local events, and activities they would have otherwise missed.[7] In addition, data collected while conducting interviews are suddenly contextualized or challenged by reading a participant's latest Facebook posts. References made during an interview may suddenly gain clarity by reading a respondent's wall, and a participant's initial—and positive—assessment of a given situation (e.g., group relations) may be contradicted by some

to recruit participants and collect data both during and after their fieldwork.

Interacting with participants via social networking sites also makes researchers' personal information open to public scrutiny. Describing your research in terms of "ethnic conflicts," being a "fan" of certain sensitive groups (e.g., Free Papua), or stating your civil status or sexual orientation on your Facebook page may alter how your participants perceive you. Fortunately, because participants who asked to "friend" me on Facebook did so after the interview, this is unlikely to have affected their participation in my study. How you describe yourself and your work, however, may influence whether potential research subjects will want to engage with you. For example, members of more conservative groups may refuse to be associated with a person or a research project deemed too controversial, which can ultimately create a selection bias in the composition of one's research sample.

Nonetheless, social networking sites provide both past and future research participants with a never-before available window into the researcher's personal life that is likely to alter researcher-participant interactions in general, and more specifically how "trust" is gained and maintained while conducting fieldwork. "I found you on Facebook," "You are my friend's Facebook friend" or "I saw on Facebook that you are part of group XXX"

proved very efficient ice-breakers when recruiting research participants in both my research locations. Knowing someone who knows someone, even if only in the virtual sphere, was enough for many people to trust me, accept to participate in my study, and refer me to their friends and colleagues.[9] Not only did Facebook play a key role in building the trust that was instrumental for recruiting participants, it has also allowed me to keep in touch—and thus maintain that trust—with the research participants and assistants after I left Indonesia, nearly three years ago.

FACEBOOK: CHALLENGING ANONYMITY, CONFIDENTIALITY, AND THE "DO NOT HARM" PRINCIPLE

And yet, we should think twice before claiming that Facebook has become the "researchers' best friend" as two important caveats arise from its use while conducting research. First, engaging with your participants on a social networking site can be seen as an acknowledgment that this person has indeed agreed to participate in your study, which in turn affects your participants' (and, if applicable, research location's) anonymity. When the number of respondents per location is particularly small, participants' confidentiality also can be affected: suddenly it becomes easier to trace any given statement back to a particular respondent. For instance, if one of the respondents is a young Indonesian female poet born in Riau, a quick look at your Facebook friends may unintentionally divulge the identity of the participant. Although this revelation is unlikely to cause problems in most liberal democ-

tions that people are not free to post anything they want on Facebook, even in increasingly democratic Indonesia. People writing critical commentaries on their friends' page or on their own may do so at their own risks. An Indonesian civil servant who had denied the existence of God on his Facebook page was placed under protective police custody after he was attacked by an angry mob in January 2012 (BBC 2012). Because atheism is a violation of Indonesian law according to *Pancasila*, the founding principles of the country, he was later sentenced to two-and-a-half years in prison and fined the equivalent of $10,600 (Neal 2012). As Facebook growth accelerated in the country, Muslim clerics also began debating the morality of the service and expressed concerns that the social networking site would facilitate "gossip and flirtation" (Associated Press 2009). The MUI, the country's leading Islamic council, already has signaled its interests in regulating the social networking site the way they did with its predecessors Myspace and Friendster (Suryakusuma 2009). Another attempt to monitor conversations and exchanges on the Internet came from the Indonesian House of Representatives' Intelligence Bill that would give legal justification to the National Intelligence Agency (BIN) to detain anyone suspected of threatening public security based on exchanges on social networking sites such as Twitter or Facebook (Nugroho 2011).

Although this bill has not yet been adopted,[11] it has, together with the "atheist controversy," raised concerns about the status of freedom of speech in Indonesia. How long will Facebook remain

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racies, such a restriction to participants' anonymity may be more problematic in higher-risk, nondemocratic regions where the mere fact of talking to foreigners often raises local authorities' suspicions and may put you under police surveillance. Indonesia is an interesting case: since the fall of Suharto in 1998, the country rapidly experienced a decrease in political repression—although substantial regional variations exist. Protest-prone provinces with an active separatist movement, such as Aceh and Papua, are much more closely monitored by the central government. Because my Indonesian research locations (Riau and Lampung) experienced little political and social turmoil in the last decade, fortunately this was not the case, and friending a foreign researcher was unlikely to have raised suspicions. Had I succeeded in securing a research visa for Papua, such potential breaches to participants' anonymity could have been much more damaging to their safety and would have needed to be better mitigated.

Second, Facebook affects the do no harm principle by compromising data confidentiality. A quick look at recent events in Indonesia illustrates this caveat. The Arab spring and the Occupy Wall Street movements both show how social media have been used to successfully build a social movement or promote democratization.[10] In Indonesia, social networking sites also have been used by civil society groups to mobilize support for whistle-blowers and anticorruption deputies or to mobilize aid when Mount Merapi erupted in the fall of 2010 (see *Jakarta Post* 2012; Nugroho 2011). Despite the potential of social networking sites for fostering social and political change, there are clear indica-

a safe place to express one's opinion? And although this has fortunately not yet been the case, what if psychological or legal harm is inflicted to a participant due to what he or she writes on a researcher's "wall"? Is it the responsibility of the researcher to remind participants of the risks this simple act may bring on them, even if it is the participants who choose to post such comments or to seek the researcher's "friendship" in the first place? Social networking sites are relatively new in Indonesia. Whereas most people understand that being interviewed on TV or writing a piece for the *Jakarta Post* rarely holds any expectations of confidentiality, the same does not seem to be true yet for Facebook. Utterances on a Facebook page, even those written in the spur of the moment, are still presumed by most people to be private—or at least, semiprivate as, depending on one's privacy settings, your Facebook friends may be the only people allowed to read these. Should an utterance in a social networking site deserve the assumption of privacy? And more generally, what are the limits to the expectation of privacy?[12] These questions, although not new, need to be reexamined in a new light: that of today's growing virtualization of fieldwork.

CONCLUSION

Facebook and other social media recently have increased the density and the geographic spread of interactions between individuals from vastly different walks of life. For researchers, this means that it is now likely that they would have a prior relationship with someone with whom they are about to engage in a research project.

But this is not necessarily a new qualitative phenomenon. Scholars, as social beings, have always had prior relationships; in fact, these relationships often serve as an entrance point into the research process. Thus, this question: has the increased density and geographic spread of interactions fundamentally changed the nature of this dilemma?[13]

From the previous discussion, one can see that social networking sites offer political scientists conducting fieldwork unparalleled opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, these provide unequaled access to a huge pool of information that may otherwise remain outside the reach of a non-insider such as the researchers. Because social networking sites also provide access to millions of potential participants and have developed into a strategic trust-building device, they are a key recruiting tool for political scientists conducting fieldwork in Indonesia and around the world. This positive depiction of the role played by Facebook while conducting fieldwork is tainted by the challenges social networking sites may inflict to participants' confidentiality, anonymity, and more generally, the do no harm principle by which researchers abide. The ethics review process needs to adapt to the fact that now more and more interactions between researchers and partici-

2. The "Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male" is perhaps the most infamously known of such studies. See Baker, Brawley, and Marks (2005).

3. Because Facebook, and several other Western social networking sites like Twitter, are banned in China, this article focuses solely on fieldwork conducted in Indonesia.

4. All foreign researchers in Indonesia first must have their research approved by RISTEK. Although I was easily granted a research permit for Riau, Kepulauan Riau, Lampung and Jakarta, I was unfortunately—although perhaps not surprisingly—unable to secure a research visa to conduct research in Papua, where migration from other Indonesian islands has significantly affected the demographic balance of the region. See Bertrand (2004) and Upton (2009). Because Kepulauan Riau was formally part of the province of Riau until 2004, the two provinces are taken as a single unit in this article, although they are analyzed separately in the larger research project.

5. Transmigration or *transmigrasi* consisted of state-organized resettlement of farmers to far-flung regions of the archipelago in an effort to ease population pressure on the "center" (mainly Java, Madura, and Bali) and to develop the "margins" (southern Sumatra, Kalimantan, and the eastern provinces of Maluku, Papua, and East Timor) (Tirtosudarmo 2009). The program—an overhaul of the Dutch *kolonisasie* program—was officially terminated in 2000 after having moved more than 1.15 million families (Tirtosudarmo 2001, 212). For an overview of the socioeconomic, ecological, and political problems faced by such programs see Hardjono (1977).

6. According to Cutler (2011), Facebook membership has tripled in Indonesia from 2009 to 2010 and, in the last six months alone, more than two millions new users have joined the social networking site according to Social Bakers (2012).

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pants will take place in the virtual sphere, thus bringing a new dimension to old ethical dilemmas. Likewise, researchers who intend to use social media in their fieldwork need to be informed about and reflect on the risks such decision entails, given their specific region and population of studies. Whether or not to engage with participants on social networking sites, how to obtain a true informed consent from these interactions, and whether or not limits to privacy and confidentiality exist on social media are questions that need to be better addressed by researchers in the ethics review process. And yet, despite raising important ethical challenges to the political researchers, social media's sky-rocketing growth and the methodological potential mentioned in this article makes it a "beast" well worth taming.

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NOTES

1. Interestingly, the popularity of the president's official page has since plummeted to only 27,000 likes as of mid-2012. See https://www.facebook.com/pages/SUSILO-BAMBANG-YUDHOYONO-OFFICIAL/82017522333 (Accessed July 11, 2012). Most Facebook pages about him are now less supportive and much more critical, as the following example illustrates: https://www.facebook.com/update_security_info.php?wizard=1#!/SBY.Raja.Kebo.PENIPUUU (Accessed July 11, 2012). I wish to thank Indonesian friends for pointing this important qualitative change to me.

7. A point that was also made by Fisher (2011) in a blog entry in which she discusses her anthropological fieldwork in Costa Rica.

8. In her blog entry relating her sociological fieldwork with sensitive populations, Cooter (2011) explains how "data from sociological networking sites has been more personal […], more spontaneous and less filtered" [than face-to-face interviews].

9. In fact, one of my research assistants was even "found" through the intermediary of Facebook. A colleague from Jakarta posted a message on her wall mentioning that I needed assistance with my research while in Riau. Shortly after, one of her Facebook friends, a local university lecturer whom she had met only briefly once, replied saying she would be happy to be my research assistant, providing me with invaluable help with translation, local knowledge, participant recruitment and even transport and accommodation.

10. On the role played by Facebook and Twitter in the Arab spring, see Dubai School of Government (2011). For a University of Washington study quantifying the use of social media during the Arab spring, see Howard et al. (2011). For Occupy Wall Street, see for instance G. L. (2011).

11. At this writing, the Indonesian Intelligence Bill was entering the third phase of its judicial review. See Sianipar (2012).

12. This question was also troubling an anthropological researcher on her blog. See Fisher (2012).

13. I wish to thank Ed Schatz for making this important point.

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