(unofficial) AOIR Risky Research Working Committee

Alice Marwick, amarwick@unc.edu | tiara.org
Please note: You can comment on this document - please feel free to add your thoughts or suggestions. I wrote this somewhat quickly.

Background

At the 2022 AOIR conference, several groups of scholars discussed the risks of doing research on politically or socially controversial topics (such as disinformation, the far-right, LGBTQ+ issues, critical race theory, climate change, and so on), particularly for scholars with racialized or marginalized identities and/or experiencing economic precarity. These risks are well-documented and include networked harassment, emotional and mental health impacts, privacy violations, and reputational damage (Doerfler et al., 2021; Massanari, 2018; Sobieraj, 2020). The one extant guide on how researchers can mitigate these risks is now six years old and does not take into account the current climate (Marwick et al., 2016). Moreover, we wish to move from an *individual* paradigm in which isolated researchers are responsible for their own risk management (and thus vulnerable to blame when this inevitably fails) to a *collective* paradigm in which we can work together to increase the resilience of our community and force institutional response (Mattheis & Kingdon, 2021; Vaughan, 2021).

Thus, the (unofficial) Risky Research Working Group was formed. As the premiere internet research association with a strong history of critical scholarship, AOIR is well-placed to help address these issues. The AOIR Ethics guidelines have been used around the globe to help researchers design their projects ethically and explain internet research to Institutional Review Boards and research institutions. Our goal is to develop a similar document.

Goals

Preliminary goals for the document are:
1. Outline the risks to researchers engaging in risky research.
2. Provide concrete steps researchers can take to mitigate these risks.
3. Argue that institutions are responsible for risk mitigation as scholars are encountering such risks in the course of their employment, whether a graduate student, postdoc, or professor.
4. Suggest institutional policies and best practices for protecting their employees who engage in risky research.
5. For scholars who do not have institutional protection for their research (independent scholars, adjuncts, VAPs, teaching professors, etc.), or those whose institutions fail to protect them, we hope to imagine collective approaches to mitigating risk and managing harms that go beyond individual responses and draw on the strengths of our larger community.

We expect that these goals will change and morph given involvement from others in our community.

We plan on drawing from research that is already underway by AOIR members at a variety of institutions including the Canadian Communication Association; the Institute for Data, Democracy and Politics at George Washington University; and the Center for Information, Technology and Public Life at UNC Chapel Hill, among others.

Next Steps

To get involved, please fill out this Google form, even if you have already emailed or tweeted Alice (I will try to add everyone who contacted me but I may miss a few people so redundancy would be helpful! Thx - Alice). The form will include your preferred methods of communication. Once we have an idea of how many people want to be involved, we can figure out a timeline and immediate next steps. If you are currently conducting research or involved in a project on researcher harassment or risky research, please note that on the form.

References

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