

A collection of real-life examples of the risks that are faced when using data in advocacy work, along with mitigation strategies to overcome these challenges.

Amplifying narratives from social media

**Using mainstream media platforms
to pick up on important conversations.**

CONTEXT

Buzzfeed, “the social news and entertainment company” aim to provide “shareable” content online to their global audience of, as of November 2015, more than 200 million people around the world.

Reporting from Twitter

In mid-2014, a conversation started on Twitter about an important topic; sexual assault. But this conversation was different to many others on the same topic- it was asking survivors of sexual assault what they were wearing when they were attacked. A BuzzFeed journalist noticed the thread, and, seeing a new angle on a crucial topic, decided to write an article about it.

She tweeted at certain people who had responded to the thread, and asked them if she could use their tweets in a BuzzFeed post, offering in the initial tweet to blur their names or their photos.

She **posted the article**¹ with the tweets and blurred photos as agreed upon with the individual tweeters: but after the article was posted, there were mixed reactions to it online. Some were upset as they didn't realise that she had actually asked the individuals quoted for permission, and instead thought she was co-opting a "private" conversation, for the sake of a story.

The person who asked the initial question was angry that she had been included in the story without her specific consent—as only people who **RESPONDED** to the thread had been contacted. But others in the same thread were grateful to her for picking up on it and amplifying important narratives shaped by survivors.

Perhaps more tellingly, in response to this case and the subsequent backlash, a number of other comment pieces were written looking at the ethical situation of using embedded tweets of such a personal nature.

These revealed vast differences in the way that journalists and big news outlets think about and use other people's social media data; some of the opinion that asking for any sort of permission was unnecessary, others pointing out the potential harms.

The challenge: what is “consent” when it comes to using someone’s tweets in a news article?

Similar to Reflection Story #2, a lot of this boils down to **LEVELS OF VISIBILITY**. Even though those who were directly quoted in the article were contacted in advance via Twitter, they may not have realised just how popular the post would become, and thus **HOW VISIBLE THEIR TWEETS WOULD BECOME**.

Essentially, though they might have agreed to their tweet being used, it's reasonable to expect that they had no idea what might happen next. In this case, the article was extremely popular, so both the article and the tweets within it got a lot of attention.

It's a sad truth that trolls on social media are common, especially around issues that are particularly important to women or marginalised communities. With this in mind, visibility can have major consequences, such as online violence against women.

Different understandings of “public” and “private” conversations make this situation more complicated; people who are replying to a tweet (especially one about such an intimate topic) may legitimately expect that very few people will see their tweet—especially if they make the active decision to **WRITE IT WITHOUT A . BEFORE THE OTHER PERSON’S HANDLE**.



1 www.buzzfeed.com/jtes/sexual-assault-survivors-answer-the-question-what-were-you-w#.eb0MnnDZBA

REPLYING TO PEOPLE ON TWITTER

If a Twitter user replies directly to another in a thread, usually that reply will only appear to that user, and ANYBODY WHO FOLLOWS BOTH OF THOSE PEOPLE. To make that reply appear as a usual tweet—ie. in the timelines of anyone who follows the person writing—is by adding a ‘.’ before the @handle.

Given how tweets work, embedding one tweet in an article could potentially lead readers to other tweets in the thread with just one click, which could increase their levels of visibility, too—and they would not have been aware that this might happen.

The case was a valuable example in journalistic ethics, and the reactions to it revealed how opinions among other journalists differed greatly. There does not (yet) seem to be an “industry standard” about the ethics of embedding tweets on sensitive topics, though there are some especially nuanced takes on the issue, such as **this one from The Cut**,² which aptly describes the situation:

*This debate seems symbolic of the growing tension between news media and social media within feminism.. For journalists, these [situations] require an ethical axis beyond public-private — one that acknowledges **the high personal stakes**³ these conversations involve for their participants.*

What could have happened differently?

The trickiest thing about this example is that the journalist in question behaved just as thoughtfully and ethically as she could have done; she asked permission clearly from each individual before embedding their tweet, and offered to remove names and photos. She was upfront about writing for BuzzFeed, and where requested, she sent links of the published article back to the people involved—something that the vast majority of journalists don’t do. There is also now a correction on the article saying that more photos have been blurred, and tweets removed upon request.

To look at what others have done, in another piece talking about this case, the tweets were quoted without attribution, with the following disclaimer:

[EDITOR’S NOTE: These replies appear without attribution to protect the privacy of users who did not anticipate that they would be quoted.]
*-from **The Root**⁴*

2 <https://nymag.com/thecut/2014/03/twitter-rape-and-privacy-on-social-media.html>

3 <https://twitter.com/theferocity/status/444234154495213568>

4 https://www.theroot.com/blogs/the_grapevine/2014/03/sexual_assault_and_women_s_attire_twitter_stories_defy_myths.html

Removing attribution entirely is one way of getting the content into the piece, but then, of course, removing the person from the story could also be problematic. In fact, the empowering angle of highlighting women's stories, and giving them space to share their own stories, could be dampened slightly with this method.

Public/private/something in the middle

From the posts, tweets, and commentary articles on this case, it's clear that **PEOPLE HAVE DIFFERENT EXPECTATIONS OF PRIVACY** despite Twitter being a public platform.

That the journalist in question did actively engage with a number of mitigation strategies to avoid harm, and yet still faced such backlash afterwards, highlights the difficulties of this reflection story. It wasn't the first, and it won't be the last example of this tension between amplifying important stories, versus putting the spotlight on certain people and increasing their visibility.



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