The growth of ‘distributed’ news access through search engines, social media and news aggregators, constitutes one of the most important recent changes to online information environments. However, this growth has been accompanied by concerns over the potential for people to be trapped inside echo chambers and filter bubbles that narrow their exposure to news and information. By 2018, around two-thirds of people across 37 media markets said their main way of accessing online news was through ‘distributed’ access. Selling data has become a debated issue across major social media sites. For example, Facebook and Instagram. Is social media just a social experiment? Tracking the digital footprints of Internet users is still a pressing issue that requires a complex solution that can be used for social media data aggregation, analysis, and visualization.

A study researched 16 databases and 2 internet search engines in order to seek out the ethicality of social media research. 17 of the 18 criteria for the study qualified. This protocol raises questions regarding how the digital information will be recorded, stored, anonymized, and secured, because even if images are obscured to shield identities, investigators may unwittingly stumble upon more data than they had anticipated. Another study showed that twitter users were concerned about Twitter monitoring them. Almost half of the participants felt that monitoring social media accounts should be considered as invading user’s privacy.

Our findings point to a deficit in ethical guidance for research involving data extracted from social media. Since social media is still new to society, ethical guidelines haven’t been made concrete. Related issues of ownership and intellectual property are also poorly defined and consent to the use of social media data in research is rarely obtained through informed choice, but rather assumed on the basis that users have chosen to place it in the public domain. There is virtually no way to guarantee that the privacy of online communication can be preserved as it is in the typical clinical research study. The goal of social media providers is to commoditize data and maximize its monetary value; they are fixated upon the instrumental value of saleable information. Autonomy, beneficence, and respect for persons are secondary—if not irrelevant—to the bottom line. Social media sites are not valuing the human using their site, but rather valuing them as a data point for future earnings.