Addressing Ethical Considerations in Network Measurement Papers

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ABSTRACT

We explore the benefits of requiring measurement papers to include an ethical considerations section. We focus our attention on what specific questions such a section should answer and how to keep the section simple and easy to write for measurement studies that do not raise important ethical issues, while seeking to ensure that important ethical issues are exposed.

1. SUMMARY

A conference program committee is usually the first outside organization to evaluate research work in network measurement. In recent years, questions about whether the work presented in a submitted paper has followed sound ethical practices have become more common within program committee discussions. The authors have experience as members and leaders of program committees struggling with ethics issues. The fundamental cause of this struggle is that our community does not have a set of shared ethical norms. Therefore, often the authors work from one set of ethical notions while the PC applies one or more different sets of ethical underpinnings as part of their review. Even conferences that deal with ethics in their call for papers do so in a fashion that does not make the struggle less daunting (e.g., IMC's admonishment that authors should act ethically). This leaves well meaning community members—in all roles—on fundamentally different pages. The situation is further exacerbated because our community does not have a culture of using valuable paper real estate to describe the ethical reasoning behind a set of experiments. This situation (i) leaves program committees to try to derive the foundations on which the paper stands and (ii) means that precautions taken by a careful researcher are not exposed to others who may leverage or build upon previous techniques in subsequent work.

In this paper we advocate for helping authors and program committees to get on the same page via an "ethical considerations" section in measurement papers that asks authors to answer a small number of specific questions about their work. By explicitly requiring such a section—even if the result is a short statement that there are no ethical issues—we at least provide the starting point for a discussion about ethics in that (i) authors have a chance to justify the ethical foundations of their experimental methodologies and (ii) program committee members can review the authors' perspective and can provide specific feedback as necessary. Further, by including these sections in published papers the entire community starts to develop a collective understanding of both what is ethically acceptable and how to think through ethics issues.[1]

Our aim in this short paper is to present a reasoned and initial strawman. We do not attempt to prescribe what is and what is not ethical. We do not tackle all possible ethical questions that arise in our work as Internet empiricalists. Rather, we advocate for a framework to help the community start an explicit conversation about the largest ethical issues involved in measuring the Internet.

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[1] The issue of how to expose ethical issues raised by rejected papers remains. While we do not mean to diminish this important aspect of the problem, we are setting this issue aside in an effort to make some progress.