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**Discussant's Comments**

**by**

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on

*Producing Ethics [for the digital near-future]*

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This is a smart and important text for reconsidering how and why ethics should be generated within academia. Discussing ethics is nearly always problematic for a discipline espousing cultural relativism—and so it is also quite bold. Markham investigates the social production of ethics in a world of unethical corporate and governmental information practices including the NSA dragnet and Facebook's recent manipulative social experiment. The book chapter accurately claims humans are increasingly framed not as beings but as data bodies by interpellating algorithms and commercial frames. Through our data practices we are self-regulating towards neoliberal subjectification. Into this dystopia we need to “produce ethics” through collective and bottom-up means. This is a necessary indeed. But the text could be even bolder by more clearly mounting a critique of the ethics of corporate social mediation and the governmentality of surveillance. In its call for the social production of ethics, the chapter falls prey to the very digital discourse it ostensibly rejects. What I mean by this is that the central claim of the chapter, that researchers need to take back the framing of ethics through a “creative,” “disruptive,” practice of “remix,” is the same claims made by the “Web 2.0” companies of Silicon Valley that are doing the unethical research to which we as scholars must respond. We need to pay closer attention to the materiality, political economy, as well as the discourse of communication in our reframing of ethics.

Redeeming a term critiqued by critical social media scholars, “produsage,” Markham claims that “As we respond to these events, we all engage in what could be called ‘producing ethics.’” The “we” in this claim are academics, “ethics” are moral frames, and “producing” refers to collective Wikipedia-style social production. I have criticized this term for its claim that the internet “democratizes” the means of media production while ignoring how the exchange value of produced immaterial objects are captured by information corporations resulting in exploitation of the so-called producer. It is now obvious, in light of the examples illustrated by Markham, that both Facebook and the NSA are in the same business of harvesting the volunteered data from producers and using the data to monitor and manipulate populations. On the one hand, Markham is critical of this process and provides graphic examples of how these relationships are framed by commercial media. On the other hand, in not rejecting the term she fails to cull the digital discourse of the very information companies that claim that social media is good for us, non-alienating, and non-exploitative. Evidence for how big data misframes humans comes from commercial culture, namely a Samsung Galaxy II advertisement in which data bits graphically swirl around and provide the

ground of potential for an urban protagonist. A second case of datafied subjectivity comes from online quizzes which hail users to act like mechanical turks submitting personal data for algorithmic responses. A third example focuses on the shift of cryptographic responsibility from corporations to individuals and illustrates a self-regulatory feature of neoliberal subjectification within which algorithms form an important duty. This rather anecdotal evidence is marshalled to argue that we are increasingly framed by corporate informationalism as not bodies but data circuits. Markham is right in identifying this as troubling. While made by people, algorithms are governed by the laws of mathematics not the policies of democratically elected regulators. They conflate people and data, empirical metrics and social signals, into a malaise confusing to all except big data itself. She asks, what ethics will emerge from this world of algorithmic power and corporate informationalism? While this question has broad and contemporary implications, Markham focuses inwardly to investigate how research ethics in the information age will develop. This book chapter is not a critique of the ethics of social media corporations but rather a call for academics to consider the social construction of ethics in the same way we consider the social construction of technology, policy, and so on and so forth. This is something of a let-down, I must admit, as I was hoping Markham would use this set-up to mount a critique of the Foucauldian informational society of discipline and the Deleuzian informational society of (self) control.

While intra-university reflexivity on pedagogy, administration, publishing, and the politics of research funding are necessary, I hoped for a more political economic critique of how the absence of robust corporate digital ethics, plus the reductive datafication of users into big data metrics, has increased alienation while decreasing ethics. At that point, a forthcoming normative assault on the capitalistic, deregulatory, and individualistic technolibertarian logics of Silicon Valley would be both admissible and welcome. Instead, readers get an assessment, to which I fully agree, that regulation of these industries is necessary. But instead of a call to grassroots movement of technolifestyle politickers, digital detoxers, cyber rejectionists, DDoS activists, hacktivist interventionists, and digital social entrepreneurs providing other social media options we get an important and insular critique of the IRB process academics are accustomed to hearing around the office. Markham certainly wants us to mobilize our agonistic and affectual potentials and she mobilizes Dana Boyd and Z. Tupekci towards those purposes but all the other academics who are not shocked form a team of straw men. I agree that a massive overhaul of research ethics in the age of mass and unwarranted surveillance is needed. I've reported elsewhere that the very use of Microsoft Outlook or Google's Gmail as default university email clients post-Snowden should be a violation of our IRB agreements to protect research subjects' privacy. Academics are largely silent on this issue or see it as too technologically difficult with which to deal. But the problems impacting the adoption of ethical cryptography within the academy are also the problems outside of academy. My wish would be that the book chapter had a more ambitious scope. IRB processes are important but this chapter has the potential to talk to wider debates about ethics and social media instead of being a dialogue amongst scholars.

This practical approach continues as readers are provided an example of good social ethical production, the author's own work in constructing an open-ended ethical framework for the Association of Internet Researchers, the leading international professional body for studies of the information society. In bringing up internet research, I was left with a final concern. If we are to produce ethics will we not be using the very proprietary and surveilled "crowdsourcing" platforms we should be rejecting because of their lack of research ethics? If our job is to be "remix" research ethics should we not pay closer attention to the political economy of social media and the infrastructures for such "creative disruption". This emphasis on materiality may

seem like a naïve empiricist's critique but it is important that in discussions of software power we tack back and forth from the material to the social in order understand the social construction of the technology. Software is simultaneously material and discursive and requires a mixed method approach in its investigation. Claims for “creative play, remix, and reverse linearity” would sound great in the boardrooms of offices in Palo Alto and Silicon Roundabout in London. If we are to truly disrupt ethics we need to pay closer attention to not only the material means of communication but also its content.