Taming Rogue Ethics: The Case for a Unified and Fair IRB Procedure

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ABSTRACT

Increasing technological progress allows researchers to incorporate growing amounts of user data into their research. However, direct and indirect involvement of user data may negatively affect users, e.g., via privacy violations. It is therefore important to assess the ethical and social risks of data collection and, if necessary, adjust the procedure in advance. This is usually done by Institutional Review Boards (IRB), which are the cornerstone of ethically and socially responsible research. We argue that the current infrastructure of ethical governance is ill-equipped to deal with data intensive computer science research.

Our conceptual approach to this argument is to investigate the ethical and social risks associated with the use of user data in research, particularly in the domain of Computer Science. Our approach focuses on examining the current ethical review procedures and their limitations, with a focus on ethical concerns in research projects where computer systems, not people, are the primary research interest. We conducted a review of existing research on the ethical and social implications of data collection in CS and the effectiveness of IRBs. We chose international ethical governance infrastructures to exemplify the highly fragmented state of ethical review. From this, we propose a unified procedure to mitigate current shortcomings of ethical governance. For this, we considered a set of key factors: domain knowledge (how well do the reviewers know the topic of a proposal?), coverage (which research projects need to be vetted?), and complexity (how easy is it to conduct ethical review?). Tying together these strands, we propose a unified framework that takes the existing ethics review infrastructure and connects IRBs to share resources and knowledge to increase both quality and coverage. We believe that harmonising ethical review is feasible, at least on a European level and has the potential to improve IRB performance.

KEYWORDS

institutional review boards, research ethics, ethical governance, research infrastructure, social studies of science