

# Ethics Policy

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Foundations for Misbehaviour Detection and Mitigation Strategies  
in Online Social Networks and Media (OSNEM)

## Version History

Version	Date	Author	Description
V0.1	30/01/2023	Fintan McGee	Initial version
V0.2	02/03/2023	Fintan McGee	Expanded with references to Eu documents on ethics, reformatted ad added to text
V0.3	12/05/2023	Fintan McGee Mikko Kivelä	Revised text and structure, added logo
V1.0	12/05/2023	Fintan McGee	Marked as Version 1.0 of Document

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## 1 Introduction

CON-NET deals with the notion of online misinformation and associated misbehaviours in the domain of online social media. This raises ethical concerns about data protection in terms of how we collect data, how we process data, and how we store data. Much of these data related concerns are addressed as part of the data management plan. The ethical concerns of CONET however extend beyond those related to data. As part of this project will also, we be running user experiments. In these experiments participants engage some tasks using the software developed as part of CON-NET. They will be asked provide feedback or their performance at the task will be analysed as part of an evaluation of both.

This document will specify the means by which all data collected will be handled process and stored in an ethical manner and how the participants in the experiments can exercise their rights. It outlines the underlying ethical principles.

This document uses horizon Europe related documents as a source of information about ethics for research projects in general. See appendix A for the full source of documents.

## 2 Data Management and Ethics

The CON-NET project focuses on online social media data, which due to its nature and the identifiability of the users is considered personal data. The public nature of online social media data does not diminish the consideration of the data as personal data.

The document will only give a brief summary of the data related aspects of ethics, however for a full understand of all of the ethics issues related to data, it should be read in conjunction with the data management plan. It also covers any other ethical concerns outside of the data management and experiment aspects.

All data stored as part of this project will be minimized in a proportionate manner while allowing the project to meet its research objectives. The minimization would typically include different ways of pseudonymisation. No more data will be stored than is necessary for our analysis. Data will be stored on secure servers with access restricted to project team members. The contents of online social media post and messages will not be made publicly available as part of this project to help preserve anonymity.

### 2.1 Data Sharing

Project partners will be signing a data sharing agreement in addition to the consortium agreement. Data will not be shared with partners outside of the project without a formal agreement with the consortium.

## 3 Methodology Ethics.

The methodology of con-net focuses on processing social media data specifically and performing evaluation experiments with participants. There is no aspect of deception in the research (no research participants will be misled) nor is there covert research taking place as part of the project.

CON-Net is engaging with social media, and behind this data there are human subjects. As a researcher we have ethical responsibility to minims any potential harm to them (Zook et al, 2017).

Data is gathers from social media platforms, following the terms and conditions of these platforms.

Commented [mi1]: here we need to be careful how this is phrased

Commented [mi2]: Should we add something about treating public figures differently? For example, Onur has some detailed analysis of prominent politicians in Turkey, and I think this should be something we can do. Exposing non-public figures like this is something we should not do? What if we find accounts that are clearly part of information operations, do we have the duty to inform the public, even though these are individual accounts?

Commented [FMG3R2]: No individual should be identifiable, there is no difference in implementation between making a person who distributed misinformation and a person who doesn't but might be arrested for other reasons

We are only using data which is publicly available on these platforms, i.e. not from password protected or closed groups. We are not targeting children or vulnerable adults (cognitively impaired, refugees, dissidents, traumatised people, irregular migrants etc.) as part of our data collection.

Online post contents are stored for processing by machine learning as well as analysis and manual labelling by the consortium members. We will not be displaying raw stored post contents as project outputs. Small samples of data may be included in a publication but only in an anonymised and obfuscated form. This will prevent sensitive data being published publicly and vulnerable groups from being targeted due to the project outputs. As part of our project infrastructure, we will provide a means by which an individual can request that their online social media data be removed from our data sets.

**Commented [mi4]:** also for manual labeling?

**Commented [mi5]:** Here we might do it in a way that we modify the content in case we want to show examples? This is the typical way of doing it.

### 3.1 Balance of responsibilities between the protection of the individual and Society

The CON-NET project will support the right of physical and mental integrity of all persons. We will endeavour to avoid identifying individuals or communities such that it would put them at risk of harm. However, this must be balanced with the responsibility to prevent individuals from causing harm to society as a whole (for example, by sharing misinformation or using bot networks for manipulating public opinion) or persecution of larger groups, when they are identified as doing so through the project. In these cases, we must consider the ethical implications of inaction. For example, our consortium member has previously implemented a public facing website <https://secim2023.biz/> for notifying the public on attempts to manipulate Turkish elections. While this research project is not directly planning on building such a website, there is a possibility that methods we develop are used for such purposes in another context. The decisions on how to balance the two possibly conflicting interests will have to be done case by case manner, but in every decision, we will consider at least the following factors:

- The scale and amount of public harm done by the misinformation or information operations
- If the accounts are bots or automated accounts, or individuals and communities
- Are the accounts owned by public figures such as politicians
- What is the minimal intervention we can do. For example, it can be sufficient to educate the public about the types of manipulation attempts and how to recognise them instead of pointing out individual content and users

### 3.2 Responsibilities towards consortium members

Additionally, no activities will be undertaken within the project which will put any of the consortium member at risk of harm.

## 4 Experimental ethics

Experiment usually involves collecting personal information about the participant. The outcome of the experiments may also be of interest to the participant. The experiments themselves must also be conducted in an ethical manner, not exploiting or harming the participant in any way.

**Commented [FMG6]:** Mention reach substudy will get independent ethics review from local committee.

### 4.1 Nature of experiment data

As part of experiments, we will gather data related to personal opinion of the experiments. We may also store demographic information such as but not limited to group, gender /sex, .

Experimental data must be stored in a pseudo anonymised fashion. Each experiment will be approved by the institution leading the experiments ethics committee.

#### **4.2 Participant Rights**

All participants will be given full notification of their rights as part of the experiment materials, as well as the purpose of the experiment and the identity of the data controller. Participant must provide informed consent before taking part in an experiment.

The participants have the following right with the respect to the experiment

- Right to access
  - Participants have the right to receive confirmation about whether or not their personal data is being processed. If that is the case, participants have the right to know what data is being collected and processed and to obtain of copy of it;
- Right to erasure
  - Subject to certain conditions specified in art. 17 of the GDPR, participants have the right to have their personal data deleted;
- Right to restriction of processing
  - Subject to certain conditions specified in art.18 of the GDPR, participants have the right to obtain restriction of the processing of their personal data performed;
- Right to object
  - Participants have the right to object the processing of their personal data when the conditions set out in art. 21 of the GDPR apply;
- Right to withdraw consent
  - If processing a participant's personal data is based on their consent, participants have the right to withdraw that consent at any time. The withdrawal of such consent shall not affect the lawfulness of processing based on consent before its withdrawal.
- Right to lodge a complaint with a supervisory authority
  - Participants have the right to lodge a complaint with institutional, regional or national supervisory body. For example, in Luxembourg the Commission National pour la Protection des Données (CNPD).

## **Appendix A: Reference Documents**

Horizon Europe: Identifying serious and complex ethics issues in EU-funded research (primarily section 2 “Humans” and section 4 “Personal Data)

[https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/guidance/guidelines-on-serious-and-complex-cases\\_he\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/guidance/guidelines-on-serious-and-complex-cases_he_en.pdf)

How to complete your ethics self-assessment

[https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/common/guidance/how-to-complete-your-ethics-self-assessment\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/common/guidance/how-to-complete-your-ethics-self-assessment_en.pdf)

Ethics and Data Protection

[https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/guidance/ethics-and-data-protection\\_he\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/guidance/ethics-and-data-protection_he_en.pdf)

Ethics in social sciences and the humanities

[https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/guidance/ethics-in-social-science-and-humanities\\_he\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/guidance/ethics-in-social-science-and-humanities_he_en.pdf)